DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 419 147 CE 076 441

AUTHOR Fleming, Ted; Murphy, Mark
TITLE College Knowledge: Power, Policy and the Mature Student Experience at University. Maynooth Adult and Community Education (MACE) Occasional Series.
INSTITUTION Natioanl Univ. of Ireland, Maynooth.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Social, Community, and Family Affairs, Dublin (Ireland).
ISBN ISBN-0-901519-93-6
ISSN ISSN-1393-5429
PUB DATE 1997-00-00
NOTE 89p.
AVAILABLE FROM Centre for Adult and Community Education, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, County Kildare, Ireland (8 pounds).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC04 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Learning; Adult Students; *College Students; *Educational Policy; Educational Trends; Financial Problems; Financial Support; Foreign Countries; Higher Education; * Literature Reviews; Needs Assessment; *Nontraditional Students; Questionnaires; School Surveys; *Student Attitudes; Student Characteristics; Student Educational Objectives; *Student Experience; Student Motivation; Student Needs; Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *National University of Ireland

ABSTRACT

The characteristics and experience of mature students at the National University of Ireland (NUI) Maynooth were examined in a study in which data were collected from the following: detailed questionnaire mailed to all 298 mature students registered at NUI Maynooth and returned by 164 (55%) of them; semistructured interviews with a sample of 20 individuals selected from the 164 respondents based on certain demographic characteristics; and 4 focus groups. Policy regarding national and international changes in higher education (HE) was reviewed along with the literature on financial issues affecting mature students in HE, mature students' relationships and external commitments, and the learning process. The typical mature student was young, single, and childless. Although finance was not the most crucial issue for the respondents, it always lay close to the surface. The main motivations cited for entering the university were to obtain a qualification that would jump-start their careers and to prove to themselves that they could get a degree. Those who entered the university with vocational ambitions were most likely to be successful. Twenty-two policy proposals were formulated. (Twenty-four tables/figures are included. Appended are a description of the study methodology and the study questionnaire. The bibliography contains 60 references.) (MN)

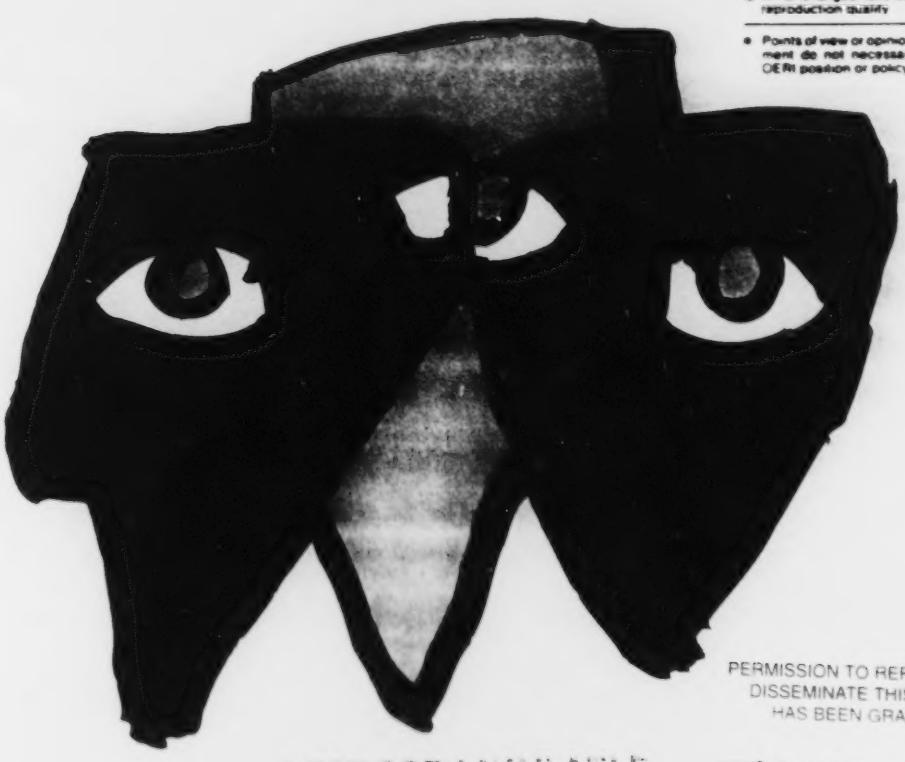
**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED 419 147

# College Knowledge

## Power, Policy and the Mature Student Experience at University

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.



BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

M Murphy

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CE 076 441



*Ted Fleming and Mark Murphy*

# College Knowledge

## Power, Policy and the Mature Student Experience at University

3

*Ted Fleming and Mark Murphy*

*Maynooth Adult and Community Education Occasional Series*

ISSN 1393-5429
ISBN 0 901519 93 6
2nd Printing 1998
© Centre for Adult and Community Education
National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 1997

The views expressed in this book are the authors', and are not necessarily those of The Centre for Adult and Community Education

Designed at Language

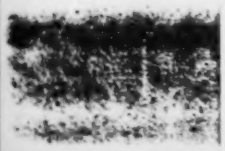
# CONTENTS


| | | PAGE |
|---|---|---|
| **List of Figures and Tables** | | iv |
| **Introduction** | | 1 |
| **Section 1:** | **What Do We Know Already?** | |
| | Chapter 1: A Policy Review | 6 |
| | Chapter 2: A Literature Review | 12 |
| **Section 2:** | **Research Findings** | |
| | Chapter 3: Statistical Findings | 22 |
| | Chapter 4: Interview Data | 36 |
| **Section 3:** | **Commentary** | |
| | Chapter 5: What do the Findings Mean? | 62 |
| | Chapter 6: Policy Proposals | 72 |
| **Appendices** | | |
| | Appendix 1: Methodology | 75 |
| | Appendix 2: Questionnaire | 77 |
| **References** | | 82 |

# LIST OF FIGURES AND TABLES


| FIGURE | | PAGE |
|---|---|---|
| 1. | Percentage of Age cohort entering Higher Education in Europe | 6 |
| 2. | Mature Entrants as a Percentage of all Entrants in Ireland, N. Ireland and Britain | 7 |
| 3. | Gender Profile of Mature Student Entrants 1993-1994 | 8 |
| 4. | Type of Institution attended by Mature Students 1993-1994 | 8 |
| 5. | Age of Respondents | 24 |
| 6. | Gender of Respondents | 24 |
| 7. | Marital Status of Respondents | 25 |
| 8. | Access Route Taken | 26 |
| 9. | Matriculation Status of Respondents | 26 |
| 10. | Other Education Courses taken by Respondents | 27 |
| 11. | Main Reasons for going to University | 27 |
| 12. | First Arts Examination Results 1997 | 29 |
| 13. | First Arts Examination Results by Access Route 1997 | 29 |
| 14. | Access Route by First Arts Examination Results 1997 | 30 |
| 15. | First Arts Examination Results by TLA 1997 | 30 |
| 16. | First Arts Examination Results by Reason for Going to University 1997 | 31 |
| 17. | First Arts Examination Status by Access Route 1997 | 32 |
| 18. | Financial Support | 34 |
| 19. | Level of Satisfaction with Aspects of University | 34 |
| 20. | Summary of University Experience | 35 |

| TABLES | | PAGE |
|---|---|---|
| Table 1. | Numbers of Places Approved on TLA since 1990 | 10 |
| Table 2. | Cases on TLA Sorted by County 1995-1996 | 10 |
| Table 3. | Present Course being attended by Respondents | 28 |
| Table 4. | Present Job while at University | 33 |

# INTRODUCTION

> *Should I return to study as a postgraduate within formal education, I hope that the study will become increasingly enjoyable and relevant, and less and less fraught with the difficulties I experienced as an undergraduate. Struggling to meet deadlines, grappling with unfamiliar study techniques and schedules, stressful and mystifying assessment procedures, an isolating and competitive educational ethos, and a sense of cultural alienation - this is how my undergraduate experience is characterised.*
>
> (McMahon, 1997, p. 34).

These are the words of a mature student at university. This report is about the experience of mature students returning to study full-time at university. There were almost seven thousand mature students attending higher education in Ireland during 1993-1994, of which about 1,700 were full-time. Nine hundred and eighty-six mature students entered full-time degree courses at Irish universities for the first time in the academic year 1995-1996. Mature students are becoming an important part of the Irish higher education sector.

The students who are the focus of this report are on the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs' Third Level Allowance (TLA) scheme. These students are unique. Firstly, their background is one of unemployment and lone parenthood. Secondly, they are adults on full-time degree courses at university. They are breaking new ground for the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, for VTOS providers, for the university, and the Irish education system. The research was funded by a research grant from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs.

The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs helps alleviate social exclusion by supporting a wide range of adult and community education programmes. The Department is interested in how the students it supports succeed and what contributes to or hinders their success. How do they do at examinations? How do they perform relative to other students? More importantly, how do students experience TLA as a financial support?

The Department of Education's Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) is an important initiative that helps long term unemployed adults re-enter education, training and work. VTOS, for many mature students, is the access route that opens the possibility of studying at university. This research is an opportunity to gauge the success of VTOS as perceived by students from the vantage point of university.

The Centre for Adult and Community Education at NUI Maynooth works with disadvantaged adults and is interested in exploring how adults learn. The Centre is particularly interested in how issues of power are experienced by students in all educational settings including the university.

NUI Maynooth is committed to encouraging and supporting mature students, through access, induction and admissions procedures that are increasingly amenable to adults. The university is interested in developing the access and accessibility of its administrative and academic activities.

While they are students, adults cope with family, money, essay writing, exams, accommodation, health, relationships and the constant temptation to drop out. How do they make meaning of their experience at university? What changes in policy are suggested by researching this experience? This research aims to find out.

The **aim** of this research is to inform and influence the policy and practice of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, the VTOS providers, the university and the mature student population.

The **objectives** are to examine:

- What we know already about
  a) mature student policy and practice;
  b) the experience of mature students from other research and literature;
- The present experience of mature students at NUI, Maynooth;
- What these experiences mean and the implications for policy.

This report is written in a series of sections and chapters that build on each other. Ideas or findings are explored over a number of chapters as a way of keeping statistical data separate from interview data and these in turn separate from the interpretation and explanation. The stories and experiences of students gathered through interviews are best understood when interpreted in the light of the statistical and other findings. Individual sections and chapters do not easily stand alone.

Section One has two chapters (Chapters One and Two) which deal with what we already know. In Chapter One we present current policy and practice regarding mature students at university and in the higher education system generally. In Chapter Two we examine, briefly, recent research findings from Ireland and abroad. Most of the research in Ireland has been about part-time students on non-degree programmes in the extra-university sector. But in other countries considerable research has been done on full-time students at university.

In Section Two (Chapters Three and Four) we present our own research findings. Chapter Three includes the statistical data gathered from questionnaires and university records. Chapter Four contains what is, for us, the more interesting story, narrative and experience of mature students that were gathered in focus groups and individual interviews. A brief description of the research methods used is included in Appendix One.

The interpretation and implications of these findings are outlined in Section Three (Chapters Five and Six). Chapter Five undertakes an explo-

ration of what the research findings mean. This is done in the context of what we know already and from a critical perspective interested in issues of power. Finally, Chapter Six outlines the policy proposals and implications for the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, VTOS providers, the university and for mature students themselves.

The research brief for this study sought to research the experience of mature students in NUI Maynooth and the National College of Industrial Relations (NCIR). NCIR was involved in the planning, implementation and supervision of the research and their interest and co-operation were important factors in the completion of the project. NCIR is successful in attracting mature students to their courses and has the important policy innovation of a 10 percent quota for mature students. At NCIR the vast majority of mature students were on non-degree programmes. Though the researchers were interested in looking at the experience of mature students at NCIR, the small number of students on full-time degree programmes there and the even smaller number of these on TLA, led to the conclusion that an in-depth study at NCIR would not be of significant statistical importance in the context of the research project. In addition, the findings of the survey questionnaire, which we undertook at NCIR, were similar to the results at Maynooth.

This report is published as part of the Maynooth Adult and Community (MACE) Occasional Series. This is intended as a publishing vehicle for reports, papers and research produced as part of the work of the Centre for Adult and Community Education, NUI Maynooth.

**Acknowledgments**

The authors would like to thank the mature students at NUI Maynooth who responded to questionnaires and generously contributed to focus groups and interviews. We cannot name them and the names used in the report are, of course, fictitious. Without their co-operation and willingness to so frankly and openly discuss their experience, this report would not have been possible. Gus Worth of the Mature Students' Association, NUI Maynooth was also helpful.

The authors are hugely indebted to a number of staff of the university. Dr. Anne Burns, Alice Normoyle, Berni Gildea, Marie Sheehy, Marian Brennan, Kevin Gordon, John McGinnity, all from the Registrar's Office and the Registrar, Prof. Peter Carr were generous with their help. Registrar's office staff and lecturers at NCIR welcomed us to their campus and generously contributed to the collection of data.

A supervisory committee helped focus the research and engaged in challenging and provocative debates about the findings and raised stimulating questions about the role of a social class analysis in the research and the gendered reality of the university. Christy Murray, Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs; Anne O Brien, NCIR; Berni Brady, Director of Aontas; Chris Mulvey, Aontas; Helen Keogh, National Co-ordi-

nator of VTOS; were all key contributors to this important and critical debate.

**A Kind of Warning!**

Students go to university in pursuit of knowledge. For some this is for their own delight and for others it is to enhance their job prospects. We are interested in what happens in their pursuit of these learnings. But in this we are not neutral. The university is a powerful and elite institution. Academic freedom is enshrined in law and confirmed by tradition. We wish the knowledge created by this research to be 'really useful knowledge' (Johnson, 1979; Thompson, 1996) and we will keep a critical eye on the data so that issues of power are explored. We welcome a debate, especially about how to foster through education a critical intelligence and transformative social change - in the university.

We are aware that the findings of this report may be controversial in one regard at least. The conventional wisdom in adult education is that a class analysis is the most useful way of understanding the issue of access for disadvantaged students to higher education. The researchers agree and are intellectually committed to this position. The most challenging finding of this research, for us as researchers, was the experience of finding that a class analysis based on income was not the best way of integrating the findings of the questionnaires and the interviews.

Of course, no interpretation, either class based or culture based, is adequate on its own to explain everything. The quotation from Brian McMahon at the beginning of this Introduction indicates a cultural analysis which is the main finding of this report. The cultural difference between the student and the academy and how the student negotiates these differences are the most important dynamic influencing whether the student succeeds at university or not. We have chosen the term college knowledge to describe the culture of the university. We have chosen the passing of examinations as the indicator of success. Others may point to alternative indicators such as personal growth, a more critical perspective, a more socially engaged consciousness, or a worthwhile job, etc.

We are not suggesting that social class and gender are not issues. The college knowledge finding has indeed gender and class dimensions. Social class and gender may be filters of students before entering university. So we invite the reader to explore these issues with us.

# *Section One*
# *What do We Know Already*

---

**Chapter 1: A Policy Review**
National and International Changes in Higher Education
Mature Students in Irish Higher Education
Background and Definitions
Conclusion and Questions

**Chapter 2: A Literature Review**
Introduction
1. Financial Issues
2. Relationships and External Commitments
3. The Learning Process
Conclusion

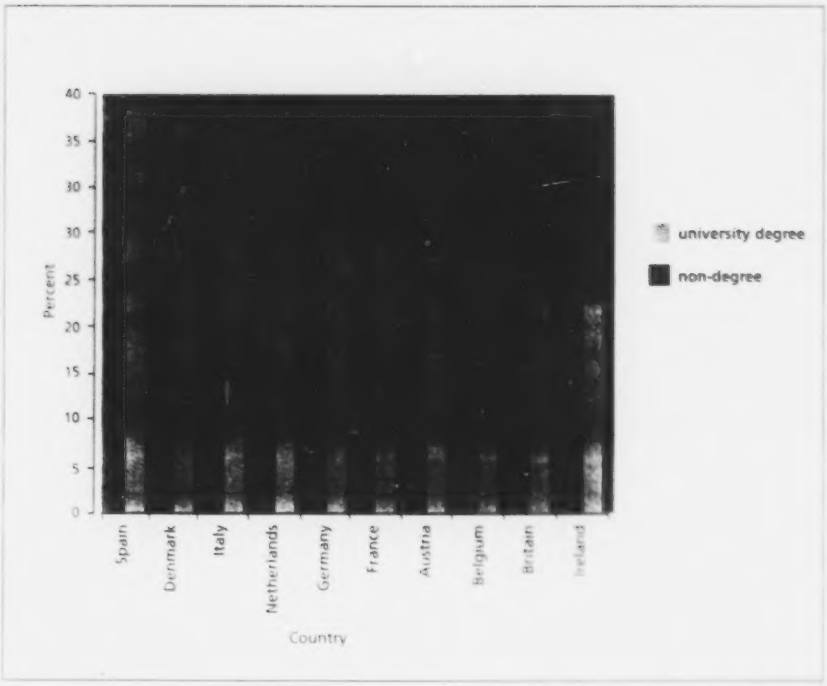
# CHAPTER 1: A POLICY REVIEW

The present study examines the experiences of mature students on full-time degree courses at university. Strictly speaking, the policy context is that of the Irish university sector. But it is also useful to look at experiences in other countries. By doing so, we can provide a backdrop to our own study, against which we examine present policies and later propose policy changes relating to mature students in Ireland. We will also briefly outline the mature student profile and TLA statistics for Ireland. Some definitions are also necessary in this chapter; mature student, TLA, VTOS, etc.

### National and International Changes in Higher Education

The number of enrolments in higher education has increased rapidly throughout Europe in recent decades. This is true of Ireland too (Clancy, 1997). In the period 1970-1990 the rate of expansion in Ireland was one of the fastest in Europe (Clancy, 1994) and involved mostly part-time mature students on extra-university courses. Ireland has below average participation in university degree programmes and above average in non-degree higher education concentrating on Business Studies, Engineering and Applied Science (See Fig. 1).

**Fig. 1: Percentage of Age-cohort entering Higher Education in Europe**

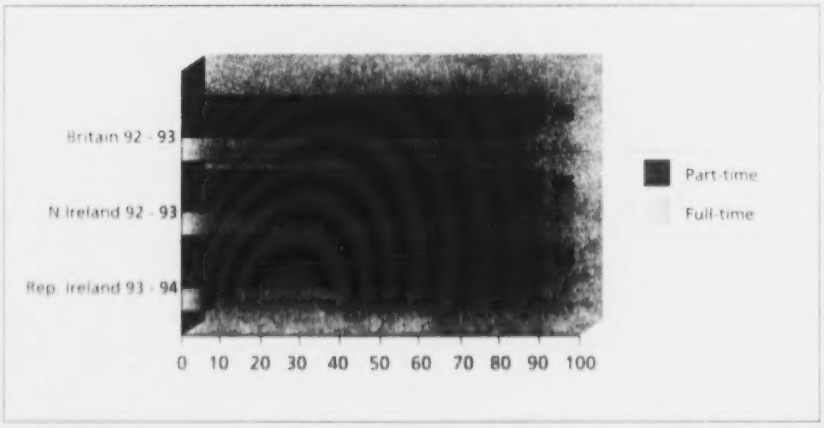



*Adapted from: Lindsay (1996).*

**Mature Students in Irish Higher Education**

Statistics from the European Union show that countries such as Denmark and Germany have a higher percentage of older students in higher education than other member states. A more recent study by Lynch (1997) compares Ireland to Northern Ireland and Britain where the differences are quite pronounced (See Fig. 2). In Ireland only 5.4 percent of full-time entrants into higher education are mature, whereas 85 percent of part-time entrants are mature students.

**Fig. 2: Mature Entrants as a Percentage of all Entrants in Ireland, Northern Ireland and Britain**




*Adapted from: Lynch (1997, p. 83).*

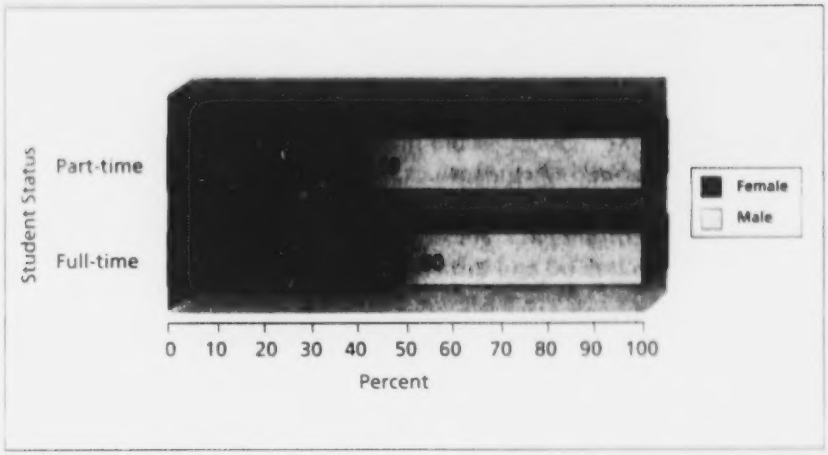
The entry of part-time adults into higher education accounts for most of the growth in the Irish non-university sector. There is also a relatively low intake of mature students to full-time programmes, when compared to Northern Ireland and Britain. In Britain, in the period 1990 to 1994, there was a dramatic increase in the percentage of students of mature years on full-time degree programmes, from 22 percent to 32 percent (Parry, 1997, p. 15). Clancy (1997, p. 95) points out that between 1986 and 1992 there was little change in the age profile of new entrants into higher education in Ireland, on either full-time or part-time courses.

According to the most recent statistics available from the HEA, 407 men and 579 women enrolled for the first time as full-time undergraduate students in Irish universities in 1995-1996. One hundred and sixteen (11.8 percent) of those were at NUI Maynooth (66 men and 50 women).

Over 50 percent of all mature students in Ireland are under 30 years of age, and 85 percent are under 40.

There are more men in higher education generally than women (57 percent as opposed to 43 percent). On full-time courses, however, there is near gender parity, at least for the year 1993-1994 (See Fig. 3).

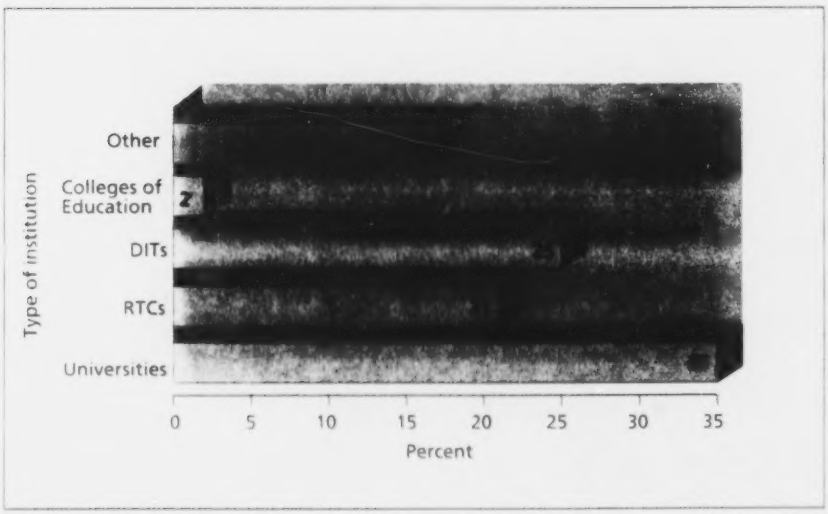
**Fig. 3: Gender Profile of Mature Student Entrants 1993-1994**




*Adapted from: Lynch (1997).*

In summary, the number of students taking degree courses in Ireland is less than in other European countries. Ireland also lags behind its closest neighbours in terms of the number of mature students on full-time courses. It seems, then, that the focus of our study - mature, full-time, degree students - are a small minority of the entire mature student population. It would be incorrect, however, to say that universities do not cater for mature students. Universities are the destination for 35 percent of all mature students, with the remainder going to RTCs, DITs, Colleges of Education, and other smaller public and private institutions of higher education (See Fig. 4).

**Fig. 4: Type of Institution attended by Mature Students 1993-1994**




*Adapted from: Lynch (1997, p. 82).*

Although there has been growth in part-time evening modular degree programmes in recent years (See, in particular, Committee on Adult Education (1973), known as the Murphy Report; and Commission on Adult Education (1984), known as the Kenny Report), there has been a much slower growth in the number of full-time degree courses for mature students. The Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education (1995) predicted that the percentage of mature students in higher education will increase to 16 percent by the year 2010.

We will come back to these issues and their implications for higher education policy in Chapter Six of this study. This study will focus on the experiences of mature students on a full-time university degree programme.

**Background and Definitions**

NUI Maynooth has been accepting mature students for many years. Now mature students account for about 10 percent of the First Arts intake. Even though a small number study Science, Computers and Theology, we will study the experience of Arts students. NUI Maynooth and NCIR have been paying attention to the needs of this student group with induction courses and other access easing measures. These are valued highly by students. In Maynooth, staff in a number of academic departments with high adult intake, have been taking particular responsibility for liaison with their adult students.

VTOS

The Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) is one of the main access routes for TLA students on their path towards university. Two versions exist. One that prepares students for Leaving Certificate subjects and the other that is more oriented towards explicit preparation for third level. The researchers are aware that not all VTOS programmes are the same and the Dublin version may be different to those outside the Dublin area. Students in NUI Maynooth come from various parts of the country and the research did not attempt to distinguish which version was more useful as an access route.

TLA

The Third Level Allowance is a Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs pilot scheme, normally available to those over 21 years of age who are to attend full-time an approved third level college on the island of Ireland. They must be on the live register of unemployed or a lone parent for at least six months. Those on Lone Parent Allowance (LPA) are also eligible for TLA. It is also available to postgraduates if they are over 24 years of age. The numbers on the scheme have increased over the years and 2,500 are currently (1996-97) on the scheme (See Table 1). Participants on the scheme retain their secondary benefits.

In contrast to the TLA, which has an age requirement of over 21, the university sector defines mature student as over 23 years of age on January 1 of the year of entry to an approved institute.

**Table 1: Numbers of Places Approved on TLA since 1990**

| | |
|---|---|
| 1990-1991 | 67 |
| 1991-1992 | 184 |
| 1992-1993 | 363 |
| 1993-1994 | 914 |
| 1994-1995 | 1,228 |
| 1995-1996 | 2,134 |
| 1996-1997 | 2,500 |

*Source: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1996.*

Women accounted for only 38 per cent of the places on TLA in 1995-96. Sixty-eight percent of all participants were under 30 years of age and 90 percent were under 40 years of age.

In 1996 NUI Maynooth had 208 TLA students. This was the highest percentage of mature students on TLA in the country (NUI Cork had 252; TCD, 172; NUI Dublin; 140). The universities had 1,015 TLA students; DITs had 182; RTCs, 518 and the other colleges had 246 (including NCIR with 35) (Source: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs).

It is of interest to note the counties from which TLA students are approved (See Table 2).

**Table 2: Cases on TLA Sorted by County 1995-1996**

| | |
|---|---|
| Dublin | 861 |
| Cork | 282 |
| Galway | 144 |
| Limerick | 103 |
| Kildare | 71 |
| Waterford, Kerry, Tipperary | 60-69 |
| Donegal | 50-59 |
| Wicklow, Louth, Westmeath, Mayo | 40-49 |
| Carlow, Sligo | 30-39 |
| Kilkenny, Meath, Wexford, Clare | 20-29 |
| Monaghan, Offaly, | 10-19 |
| Roscommon, Laois, Cavan, Leitrim, Longford | less than 10 |

*Source: Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs, 1996.*

Some students do move residence to avail of TLA but this does not account for the differences in approvals between counties. Those counties with third level colleges have many more TLA approvals than counties like Roscommon, Laois, Cavan, Leitrim and Longford without a third level facility.

More importantly, there is a remarkable correlation between the counties with few applicants and those designated as disadvantaged (See

Designated Areas of Disadvantage to Participate in Sub-Programme 2, The Operational Programme: Local and Urban Development - Source: Gamma).

**Conclusion and Questions**

This data, already available, is intended as a general introduction to what we know already. We now turn to the literature and research findings to give a background for our own research.

A number of questions suggest themselves.

1. If the numbers of mature students continue to grow, what effect will this have on universities?
2. What changes in the courses, in the curriculum, in the structure of the programmes and in assessment methods offered by universities will be required by this increased adult population?
3. What lessons can be learned from the experiences of other countries who in some areas are ahead of the Irish situation?
4. What actions could be taken to remedy the unequal geographical access to higher education particularly from those counties designated as disadvantaged?

# CHAPTER 2: A LITERATURE REVIEW

**Introduction**

There is now substantial evidence that mature students make exceptional students (Scott et al.,1996, p. 223). They are both highly motivated and perform well academically. Research and policy makers have however, tended to focus on access, motivation, reasons for participation and success rates, rather than finding out how mature students experience higher education. This literature review will describe some of the issues, concerns and problems which mature students face in their efforts to achieve their goal. It will provide a context in which the experience of students at NUI Maynooth will be studied and will focus on those issues which appear to have the most direct bearing on their success or failure.

But before that, some qualifying remarks: firstly, the research methods of these studies vary considerably, some are qualitative and others quantitative. Secondly, the studies have been carried out in a variety of settings such as colleges, polytechnics and universities, mostly in English speaking countries. Thirdly, the studies explore the experience of both part-time and full-time mature students. Students who work full-time and go to classes part-time have a different set of needs and demands to those who attend university full-time.

In reviewing the literature we found three major issues or themes relating to mature student experience:

1. Financial Issues
2. Relationships and External Commitments
3. The Learning Process.

**1. Financial Issues**

Two major British studies provide some information about the financial difficulties faced by mature students. Bourner's study of nearly 3,000 part-time students (1991) found that over 20 percent experienced difficulty meeting the financial costs of higher education. Although 80 percent of the respondents did not experience difficulty, 90 percent of the sample were in full-time employment, and of these, 80 percent "received at least partial assistance with their fees from their employers" (Bourner, 1991, p. 91).

In Woodley, et al's. study (1987), 25 percent of students had difficulties with costs. One out of three full-time students was financially "much worse than ever before" while part-time students generally felt there was "no change" (Woodley, et al, 1987, p. 127) in their financial situation. At least twice as many full-time students incurred child-care costs as did part-time students.

Two factors seem to have a bearing on their financial situation: social class and gender. The above cited studies focused on middle-class mature

students. (In Woodley, et al. (1987, p. 69) only 1 in 8 of the respondents were working-class.) When working-class students, or students from other marginalised groups, are researched the issue of finance takes on a different character. Bryant's (1995) study of 187 students at Ruskin College, an historically working-class "second-chance" institution in Oxford, found that over two-thirds of the students incurred debt as a direct result of returning to full-time education. The same number reported that this financial burden adversely affected their academic studies. As one of the students put it;

> what concerns me most? Stress. Always on my mind, the financial aspect of being a mature student (Quoted in Bryant, 1995, p. 271).

Burkitt (1995, p. 160) reports that;

> it is extremely difficult to concentrate on studying when basic needs such as food, clothing and shelter are not met. Often women find themselves in situations where these requirements are threatened and they have no alternative but to withdraw or defer.

She also points to the financial pressures on lone parents who are faced with the costs of child care. Indeed, being a mother and a mature student, regardless of marital status, can bring financial difficulties. According to Scott, et al. (1996, p. 235) lack of finance is one of the main reasons why women with children drop out.

Non-completion and retention become major issues for working-class and other socially disadvantaged groups when faced with financial difficulties. According to McGivney (1996, p. 76), mature students on low incomes "tend to have high-withdrawal rates", rates which are even higher among the unemployed.

In Ireland, finance is a major issue for mature students. The Technical Working Group for the Steering Committee on the Future of Higher Education, found that lack of adequate financial resources was the main difficulty experienced by full-time mature students (Lynch, 1997, p. 100). Lynch points out elsewhere (1996, p. 22) that this was a particular problem for students from working-class backgrounds.

Finance and social class are inextricably connected. Indeed, participation in higher education is influenced by social class. Thirty-eight percent of all entrants into higher education come from the four highest socio-economic groups, which account for only 21 percent of the population. While the five lowest socio-economic groups account for only 35 percent of entrants, they account for 56 percent of the population (Clancy, 1997).

It is also true that these divisions are amplified when students' area of study is taken into account. The more prestigious the area of study (Law, Architecture, Medicine) the more likely it will be the choice of the higher

socio-economic groups. The lower socio-economic groups are more likely to select Education and Social Science.

Initiatives taken in Ireland to overcome these class disparities have been positive but will not substantially alter the participation rates at university. It is argued by Devine (1996, p. 4) that the decision to abolish fees, rather than increase the grants maintenance scheme, seriously calls into question the commitment to alleviate disadvantage in Ireland. Devine also makes the interesting point, to which we will return, that confining the discussion about equality of access to issues of fees does little to remedy social inequality.

In summary, both in the experience of students and from the perspective of public policy, certain groups of students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, experience more financial hardship than others.

## 2. Relationships and External Commitments

Students arrive at university as part of a network of interpersonal relationships. Partners, children, family and work commitments figure prominently in their lives, accompany them to college and play a crucial role in their success or failure.

Bourner's study of part-time students provides a useful description of the kinds of external issues that can affect a mature student's ability to achieve a qualification. Students' work commitments, of course, caused some problems, and the majority of respondents were forced to miss some of their classes because of these commitments (Bourner, 1991, p. 87). About half stated that they had problems, on occasion, with completing readings and course work. Bourner suggests that there is a need to "achieve flexibility in structuring part-time degree courses around work commitments" (1991, p. 88). He does not make the same recommendation about family commitments, although the data shows that at least one third of respondents missed classes because of family commitments, with some respondents unable to do readings and course papers for the same reason.

The management of one's public and private life posed a different dilemma for women. Their new identity which involves being away from the home and beginning, in many cases, a new more public career, offers new opportunities and raises some difficulties (Pascall and Cox, 1993).

The literature points to family commitments as a major issue in the lives of mature students. There is quite an amount of evidence showing that college life can damage relationships and in turn these relationships can have a profound impact on the experience of being at college. Again, this is especially true for women, particularly for those in long-term relationships and/or with children. Maynard and Pearsall (1994) compared the experiences of men and women and found that differences did exist in how each coped with student and domestic life. As Maynard and Pearsall state (1994, p. 239);

> Most (women) prioritised respectively the demands of the home and their courses as the pressures each presented varied. By contrast, the men were able to commit themselves more wholeheartedly to their student lives, academically and socially. Although this did not seem to directly affect the women's academic performance, some felt that their overall experience had been impaired. Furthermore, while both sexes experienced stress during their studies, it was of a different nature and intensity for the women...twice as many female mature students as men expressed concern about non-academic problems such as family stress.

In Redding and Dowling's research into the rites of passage among women re-entering higher education (1992), women were often pulled in many directions, having to play the role of worker, student, parent, wife, friend and homemaker. It is the function of such rites of passage to reduce conflict between their new role as student and the external roles that are frequently affected in some way. Indeed, rites of passage are created by the women in order to cope with these life-changing transitions. Rites of passage are rituals that mark, organise and celebrate the passage of an individual through life transitions. Applying for admission to university, registration, the first essay, passing exams, are such rites. The institution has had generations to develop its rites (mostly about graduating!), but as the arrival of adults on campus is a new phenomenon, these students are only beginning to develop their own marker events. Of course feminists will quickly see the gender issues here, where separations are celebrated but not beginnings! Redding and Dowling suggest that higher education should "aid returning women in the development of family rituals" (1992, p. 235). Specifically, they suggest that the higher education institutions involve family members more in the progress of their mother, sister, wife, or daughter, and make the campus more "family friendly" by having open days, partner events, etc.

These rites of passage are part of a process of negotiation, particularly for women, who face difficulties when it comes to combining their roles in college and at home. Wright (1994), in reviewing Edwards (1993), provides a good summary of the negotiation process which women go through when they enter higher education;

> Besides making conflicting demands on women's time, family and higher education involve opposing modes of organisational consciousness. While women in this study regard emotional support and attention as a crucial part of their family responsibility, education demands objectivity and abstraction. For most of the women, then, straddling the two worlds involves shifting between the local and the particular arena of the family and the conceptually ordered arena of higher education.

This straddling of the two worlds of family and education produces some hazardous side-effects. University can damage relationships. Several stud-

ies (Cochrane, 1991; Edwards, 1990; James, 1995; Wray, 1996) cite returning to study as a major source of conflict between partners. Edwards found that at least 25 percent of respondents to their study went through separation or divorce as a result of the pressures academic life put on relationships. The transformation in roles that takes place during the student's time at college, can create conflict at home, where husbands/partners "far from welcoming such changes, are often unwilling or unable to make the appropriate adjustments needed during this time" (Maynard and Pearsall, 1994, p. 238).

There is also a class dimension to role negotiation. James (1995) compared two middle-class women with two working-class women, and found that new learning created more problems at home for working-class women. As one of these women explained;

> [at home] I'll be talking about certain things and I suddenly realise that I'm talking about specific subjects and they're looking at me as though I've come down off another planet, because I'm talking more academically. I'm talking about theories, and it'll come out in such trivial conversation and I think, Oh God, you know, shut up, don't say that ...I mean they don't know what you're talking about. And they look at you and say 'will you just give it a rest' (Quoted in James, 1995, p. 461).

Some mothers, according to Davis (1984) experience

> guilty feelings about neglect of their children, for mothers with dependent children, the children's problems come first: 'If the children are unhappy or need me, then I just won't sit the exams'. But many found returning to university a positive factor, stimulating interest, raising ambitions and providing interesting family discussions.

In discussing relationships and external commitments, both gender and social class colour the experience of being a student in important ways.

### 3. The Learning Process

Being a mature student, or any kind of student for that matter, is essentially about learning. And from the literature we know a considerable amount about this process. Adults do not just bring their experience with them into university; they are their experience (Knowles, 1978). This distinction is important in understanding how adults learn. Weil (1986, p. 232) describes a dissonance between the "learner identity" of the mature student and the "learning context" within which the mature student finds him/herself. Learner identity, for adults, is firmly rooted in their experience. From experience adults learn about what it is to be a man/woman, belong to a social class, etc. Experience is the source of questions. Adults learn from experience and learning is tested in the world of experience. This is their "learner identity" - grounded in experience.

The college too has its identity that provides the context within which mature students learn. How students learn to negotiate between their own learner identity and the learning context of the college has a major effect on both their self-confidence and academic success. We will return to this in the research findings. And, as with external commitments, this process takes on different forms for different groups of mature students. We can illustrate this process of "learning by negotiation" by examining two areas of student experience: their experience of course work; and their experience of faculty.

**Experience of Course Work**

Woodley, et al. found that, when speaking about their courses students were "overwhelmingly positive in their assessment of the benefits of mature study" (1987, p. 104). The most significant aspect of the course was the;

> interest and practical knowledge they had gained in a chosen area, and their gains in generating information and self confidence in their academic ability (1987, p. 104).

If we look past this sweeping statement, differences can be found among different groups of adult learners. In Woodley, et al's. study (p. 121) age and gender play a role in the way students react to course content. Older students are more likely (subjectively at least) to experience memory problems, and women are "much more likely to lack confidence in their abilities." All mature students experience some degree of difficulty with studying and study skills, mostly because the typical mature student has been away from formal education for some time. All of the studies reviewed mention this as a factor in mature students' experiences of higher education.

In light of this, it is significant to note that, according to Bourner (1991, p. 68), two-thirds of respondents to his study "were not aware of receiving any study skills guidance at the outset of their courses." From an examination of the other literature, however, it appears that "study skills" may not be the factor educators assume it to be, but rather works as a code term for two more significant issues: *management of study time*; and skills at *studying in a manner acceptable to the university*.

(a) In researching management of study time, Johnston and Bailey found that some had dropped out of their course early because of work overload (1984, p. 9). At the same time, they point out that by the third term of the course, "most of the complaints of overload were retrospective, as most students had learnt to pace themselves" (1984, p. 9). It seems that the danger period may be during the early stages of the course.

(b) To be successful students need to be able to study in a manner acceptable to the university. This involves a process of negotiation

between student and teacher. In Weil's (1986) study, most of the students interviewed were working class, and had achieved a great deal of self-confidence and self-awareness through their experiences away from the formal education system. In the face of demands placed on them by the college, they could sense that the self confidence they had gained was under threat. Faced with the reality of higher education, the students interviewed by Weil were forced to consider the choice between producing work the way the college demanded (and succeed) or work in pursuit of their own definitions of worthwhile knowledge (and fail). As one woman put it;

> my difficulty here....It's not that I'm stupid or not intelligent. Here I have the difficulty of taking it as it's given, and giving it back to them as THEY want it...(Quoted in Weil, 1986, p. 225).

In this context, it is understandable that some mature students have difficulty adjusting to what is considered 'acceptable' studying behaviour. There is a profound clash explored in the literature between the experience based learning of the student and the academic learning of the university (James, 1995, p. 454). These insights are nearest to the overall findings of this research project.

**Experience of Faculty**

There is good evidence to suggest that many mature students enjoy the time spent with faculty. Cochrane (1991), in his study of six mature women students at Queen's University, Belfast, found that faculty were very supportive;

> the women felt that they were treated well by their lecturers and tutors. They commented that the academic staff respected them interest, and handed in work on time (Cochrane, 1991, p. 47).

Crozier and Garbert-Jones (1996) found mature students in a much less favourable position when it came to contact with lecturers. Nine of their sample of twenty-one reported difficulties relating to lecturers, a situation which the author describes as 'shyness';

> the lecturers at college can make you feel difficult because you know they know what they're talking about - they know you don't know what you're talking about. I feel they've got more knowledge than me - so I wouldn't - I'd feel shy about questioning them on anything unless I was really sure they'd made a mistake or something - I wouldn't dream of - I'd argue a point but I wouldn't dream of saying they were wrong in any way because they - I'd say they were superior to me (both quoted in Crozier and Garbert-Jones, 1996, p. 195).

It may be that this 'shyness' is a manifestation of an underlying power relationship between the teacher and the taught. There are also

instances of a power dynamic among the students interviewed by Weil (1986; 1988). This quote from a black working-class man typifies the feelings generated by being rudely made aware of a subordinate role as learner;

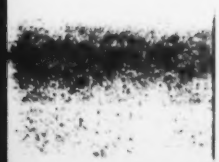
> the first year you learn that the boundaries are clearly defined by the institution. You're ignorant. You don't know what to expect. There was a useful comment one lecturer made. 'Undergraduates have no opinion.' You are made to feel that way, to say, 'I am the clay, you are the potter. Shape me, mould me.' (Quoted in Weil, 1986, p. 226).

So it may be unwise to assume that someone is shy or purely lacking in self-confidence, as it could be assumed that all they have to do is overcome their shyness or lack of self confidence and everything would be all right in academe. Weil's work suggests that it could be the way in which the teacher and the institution relate to the student that causes this loss of confidence.

Johnson-Bailey and Cervero (1996) interviewed a number of Black women in higher education and explored the ways in which these women used certain strategies to cope with the institutional problems they faced. One of these strategies was silence. In the following example a teacher showed a series of films with racist stereotypes targeted at Blacks;

> the films that she would present to the class would use the terms nigger, and...I being the only African-American woman, African-American period in that class. The first time that she - I don't know if she did that to incite...discussion, but it never came up. And I never brought it up. I feel that for some reason that I should have spoken up....but I don't know if I felt that if I had mentioned anything that, that it may have affected my grade...I was afraid to throw stones when no one else brought it up (Black woman quoted in Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1996, p. 149).

There are echoes here of bell hooks' (1994, p. 83) eloquent work on her experiences as a black woman in higher education. The issue of power and how it is embedded in the structures and practices of higher education institutions is worth much more attention. The expectation is that adults will fit themselves into the educational system and many of the questions asked about their experience indicate a tendency to locate the problem either in the student or in their background. For example, if we ask how VTOS students are succeeding we may be in danger of problematizing the student rather than problematizing the issues of privilege, power and institutional rigidities (Lynch, 1996, p. 8; James, 1995, p. 453). It may be worth asking; how is the university succeeding with its mature students?



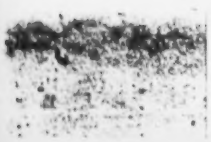
## Conclusion and Questions

The three areas of mature student life that we have discussed in this review, finances, relationships and external commitments and the learning process itself, are experienced in different ways by different students. The main finding is that mature students experience college as a process of negotiation. This process is really a conflict between academic and domestic roles and also a conflict between the roles of learner and teacher.

Though this is not a comprehensive review of the literature, it will provide a context for the following chapters in which the findings of the research and a commentary are outlined. We will pay particular attention to how this process of negotiation affects different groups of students and their lives as learners.

From what we know already a number of questions suggest themselves:

1. What is a university for?
2. What effect should the introduction of mature students have not just on admission procedures and administrative structures but on the curriculum, on the processes and dynamics of the staff/student relationships and above all on power in the academy?
3. How can the university go beyond a discussion of access that frequently addresses technical issues to discuss accessibility as a change of culture and power?
4. What impact should the gender and social class of students have on how knowledge is generated and learning facilitated at university?
5. How are mature students succeeding at university and how is the university succeeding with mature students?



# *Section Two*
# *Research Findings*

---

**Chapter 3: Statistical Findings**

Introduction
1. General Profile of Mature Students
2. Access Route, Previous Education and Reasons for going to University
3. Present Educational Status and Examination Results
4. Present and Previous Employment Status
5. Financial Support
6. Attitudes Towards University

Conclusion

**Chapter 4: Interview Data**

1. Third Level Allowance and Finances
2. Access Route and Reasons for Going to University
3. The Experience of Student Support
4. Relationships and External Commitments
5. The Learning Process

Conclusion

# CHAPTER 3: STATISTICAL FINDINGS

> *Knowledge is a cultural thing; my education did not stop when I left school at the age of sixteen, and the three years I spent in the formal third-level institution in Maynooth represents only a very small part of my educational history. In fact I feel that I had to suppress aspects of my education in order to conform within the third-level sphere. My life, in some respects, was put on hold; I was constrained. While I can list the benefits of my degree course - I can now more confidently put pen to paper; I can use a word processor; I am able to structure an argument in a formalised, 'rational' sense; I have a History/Sociology honours degree - I personally am not impressed with what I am supposed to have achieved during those three years. Paradoxically, this state of being unimpressed is probably the most positive thing that I have learned. I now know that almost anyone, given the right support, has the potential to obtain a degree, a master's degree, or a doctorate.*
>
> (McMahon, 1997, p. 28).

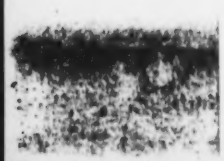
**Introduction**

The findings presented in this section are compiled from both quantitative and qualitative sources. Information was gathered using questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. This section is divided into two chapters. Chapter Three outlines the statistical data from the questionnaires and university statistics and Chapter Four presents the results of interviews. The latter is far more interesting for our purposes as it attempts to paint a picture of university life as experienced by mature students.

The information in this Chapter is presented as a way of setting the scene for the more narrative presentation of interview data in Chapter Four. The difficulties of compiling statistical data should not be underestimated. The researchers, as a result of the experience of doing this research, question the possibility of taking an objective stance in researching people. Two difficulties in particular are an indication that quantitative research is such a partial look at any group.

Firstly, it is difficult to actually contact all the 298 mature students on campus! People change address. Women may have changed their names on getting married and changed back again on separation or as a way of expressing a new identity. College records are partial. One year the college has lists of all applicants. The following year these records are not kept and only registered students are recorded or they are not easily identified as mature students. TLA students are not recorded as a separate group. University administration is designed to track students' fees and examination results.

Secondly, in attempting to study the social class of students, other difficulties arose for the researchers. We were convinced that we needed to



look at the social class of students and make some discoveries about the class distribution of mature students, see how successful they were at college and what particular needs or difficulties they experienced. Identifying someone's social class is becoming increasingly problematic and our experience of attempting to identify the social class of any student, either through questionnaire or interview, was disorienting and ultimately not very useful. For some their social class was clear. But an increasing number, because of changed circumstances in their working and social lives, defy categorisation. Lone parents, people who lose their jobs, separated people all contribute to the difficulty of making clear class categorisations. So what did we do? Where we could we engaged in a class analysis, aware that it was partial and more complex than many survey research reports indicate!

The researchers undertook this research committed to a class analysis. Many of our discussions about the research centred on an evolving awareness that such an analysis was not consistent with the data. It became clear that issues of social class may well have been influential and even decisive before these students registered at university.

We are not suggesting that there are not class and gender dimensions to the issues being discussed but the main story is most truthfully told through an analysis of two different kinds of knowledge: the college knowledge of the academy and the experiential knowledge of the student. But first let us look at the data.

Where we had access to official Maynooth records they are included in this chapter.

We present the statistical information from the questionnaire under six headings that relate to the original research brief. These headings are:

1. General Profile of Mature Students;
2. Access Route, Previous Education and Reasons for going to University;
3. Present Educational Status and Examination Results;
4. Present and Previous Employment Status;
5. Financial Support;
6. Attitudes Towards University.

### 1. General Profile of Mature Students

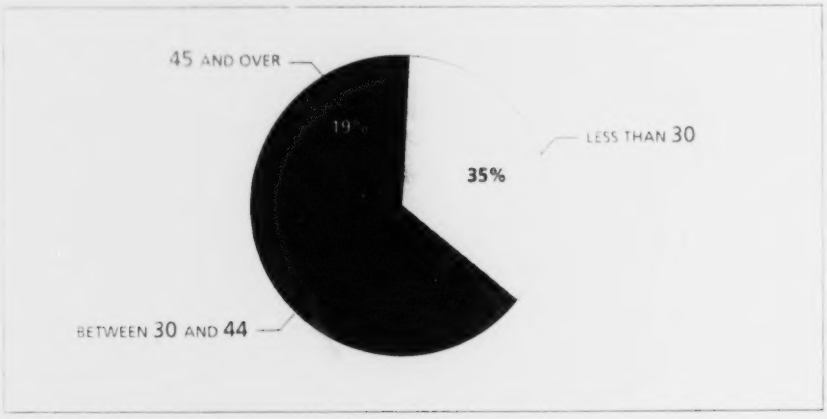
One hundred and sixty-four people responded to our questionnaire out of a possible 298 students registered in autumn 1996. That was a response rate of just over 55 percent.

#### Age

Over 80 percent of respondents to the questionnaire were under 45 years of age (See Fig. 5). This is close to the figure Lynch (1997) found, which was 85 percent under the age of 40. But her figures included both full and part-time students. Also, like Lynch's study, there appear to be two

distinct cohorts of students within this age range, one grouping in their twenties and the other in their thirties and early forties. Over one third of respondents were in their twenties, while nearly half were aged between 30 and 44. In our survey, 19 percent were over the age of 44. Official Maynooth figures show that 15 percent are over the age of 45; 39 percent are under 30, and 46 percent are between the ages of 30 and 44.

**Fig. 5: Age of Respondents**



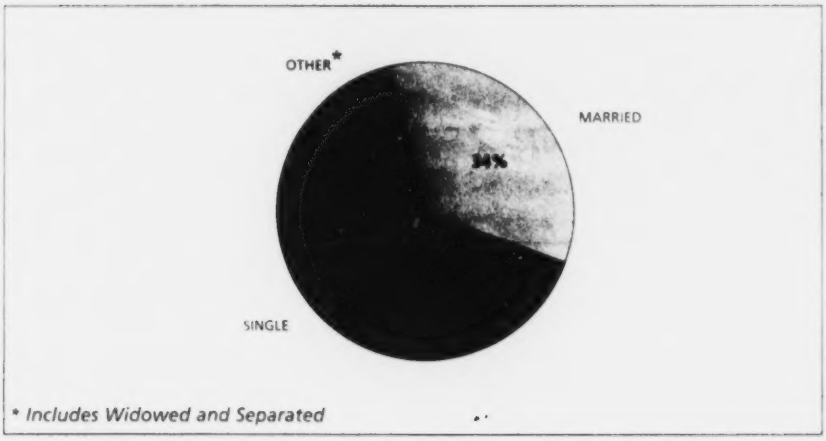

**Gender**

Fifty-five percent of respondents to the questionnaire were female, and 45 percent male (See Fig. 6).The national profile (Lynch, 1996) puts the figure for full-time female students on a par with males. According to Maynooth records, of the 298 mature students at NUI Maynooth, 46 percent are male and 54 percent are female. Preliminary figures for 1997-1998 at NUI Maynooth indicate that two out of three first year mature students will be women.

**Fig. 6: Gender of Respondents**

**Marital Status**
Fifty-five percent of respondents were single (See Fig. 7). Just over one in three of all respondents was married, while one-tenth were either separated, divorced, widowed, or lived in a long-term partnership.

Fig. 7: **Marital Status of Respondents**

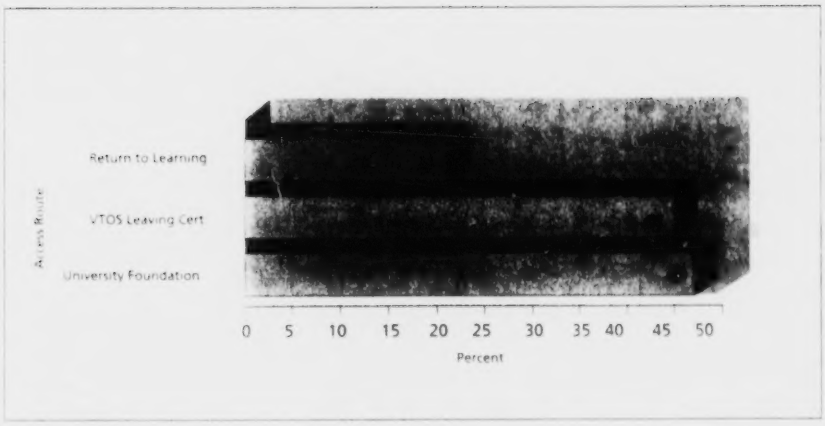



**Number of Children**
Fifty nine percent of respondents had no children. The typical mature student is likely to be young and single.

## 2. Access Route, Previous Education and Reasons for Going to University

**Access Route**
Forty-four percent of all respondents did not take any access study route prior to coming to Maynooth (See Fig. 8). Of those who did, the most popular access routes were the VTOS-Leaving Certificate and University Foundation courses. By University Foundation we mean the NCIR and Pearse College University Foundation courses. By VTOS Leaving Certificate we mean those VTOS courses that teach a Leaving Certificate programme alone and do not offer a specific university access year. To provide a university access route is the objective of the University Foundation courses. The Return to Learning courses offer an access to higher education and are offered by both UCD and NUI Maynooth on campus. They provide access to the ethos and atmosphere of university life. Some students took more than one access route.

**Fig. 8: Access Route Taken**

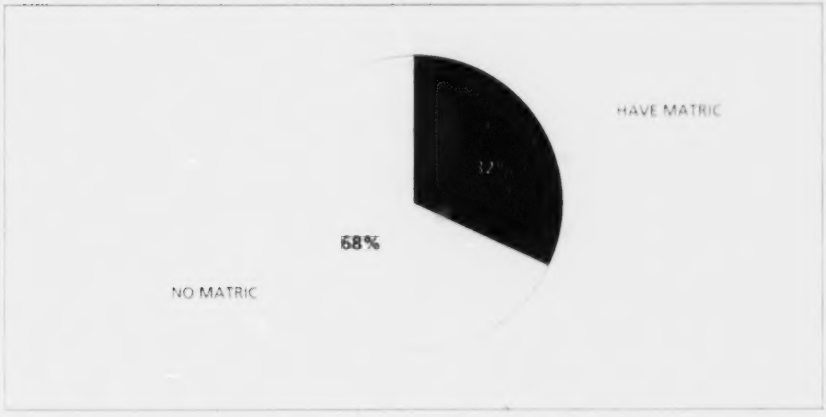



*Source: Questionnaire (some took more than one access course)*

**Previous Education**

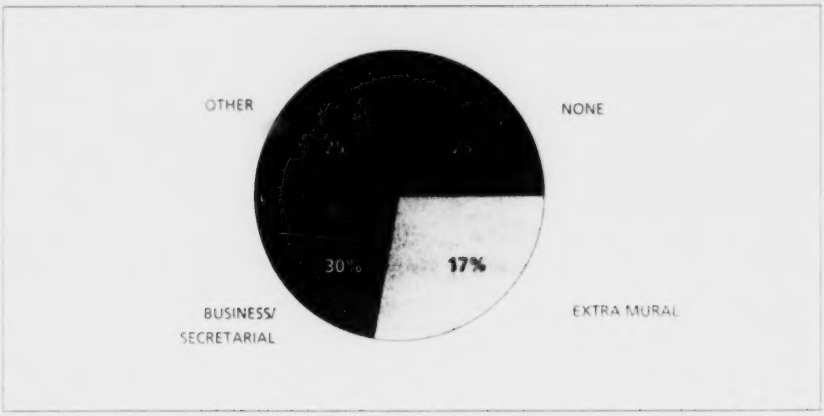
Two-thirds of the respondents did not matriculate on the basis of their Leaving Certificate, that is, they did not meet the standard entry requirements of the NUI (See Fig. 9). There is a heavy reliance on mature entry status as a way of entering university.

**Fig. 9: Matriculation Status of Respondents**




The majority of respondents (72 percent) had been involved in some form of organised education since they left school. The most popular education courses that people attended were job-related, e.g. business studies and computer skills (30 percent). Seventeen percent had taken at least one extra-mural course at some stage before university. The category "other" includes those respondents who took a diploma, part of a degree, a nursing or a Montessori diploma (See Fig. 10).

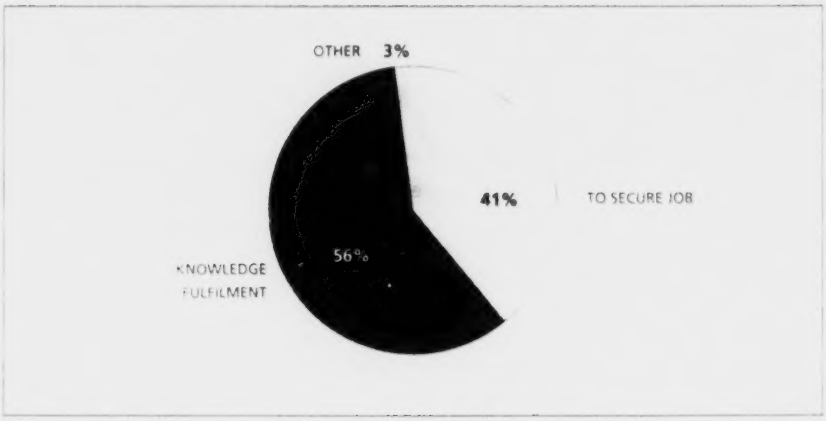
Fig. 10: Other Education Courses taken by Respondents




**Reasons for going to University**

Forty-one percent stated that their main reason for going to university was to improve their job prospects (See Fig. 11). An even larger percentage (56 percent) viewed university and the knowledge learned there as an end in itself, as something to be valued in its own right. Many of these students had a lifelong ambition to go to college and get a degree, regardless of the consequences it would have on their job prospects. These findings will be expanded and more details given in the interviews that are presented in Chapter Four.

Fig. 11: Main Reasons for going to University




**3. Present Educational Status and Examination Results**

The most important indicator of success at university is the ability to pass examinations and in this research we wanted to find out how mature stu-

dents fared. We had at our disposal two sources of information. Firstly, we had the results of the questionnaires that were sent to all mature students. The students were from Second Arts and Third Arts in the academic year 1996-1997. Secondly, we had access to examination statistics from the college. Though we had the results of students who sat examinations, we had no way of checking when or why students had dropped out before sitting any examination. So in this section we present both sets of results and attempt to draw reasonable conclusions.

Most of the respondents to the questionnaire (63 percent) were in either first or second year at university (See Table 3) and the vast majority of mature students at Maynooth are taking Arts subjects. The "other" category comprises the small percentage taking Science or Theology.

**Table 3: Present Course being attended by Respondents**

| Course | Number | Valid Percent |
|---|---|---|
| 1st Arts | 55 | 34 |
| 2nd Arts | 47 | 29 |
| 3rd Arts | 28 | 17 |
| Post-graduate | 24 | 15 |
| Other | 08 | 05 |
| Total | 162 | 100 |

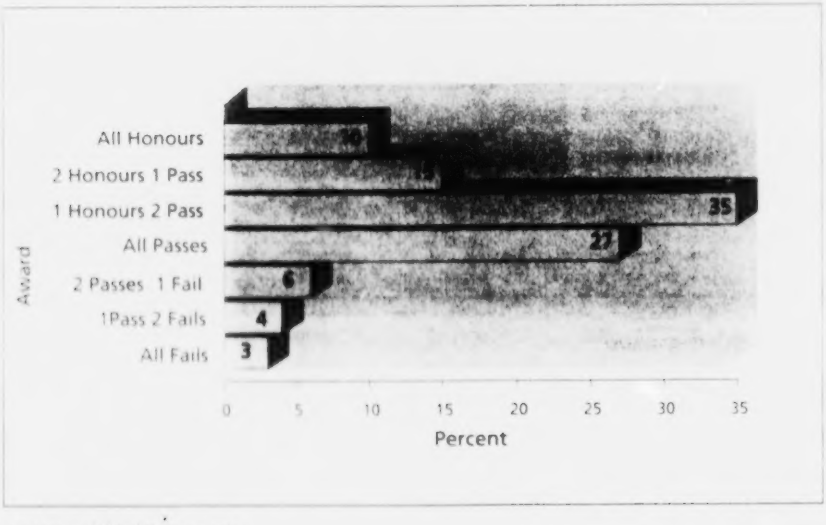
The most comprehensive figures we can provide are for first year examinations (See Fig. 12). We also had access to the examination statistics for First Arts examinations in 1996 and 1997. Mature students generally do quite well at exams and the 1997 results agree with the 1996 results.

Seventy-eight mature students took First Arts in 1997. Eighty-six percent passed - a slightly higher pass rate than the pass rate of the total student population.

When we examine these figures we find a surprising result: those who took an access course did not do as well as those who did not take an access course (See Fig. 13). Those who do not take an access route are usually those who matriculated on the basis of a Leaving Certificate. But when we look at those who took an access course, and compare them, we see that some do better than others. In particular, those who took the University Foundation course (at NCIR and Pearse College) had a higher success rate than those who took the VTOS Leaving Certificate or Return to Learning courses run by NUI Maynooth and NUI Dublin. (See Fig. 14). The mature student failure rate for the year is 13 percent. (This compares favourably with the average results for the entire student population where the failure rate was 19 percent.) Those who took one of the University Foundation courses had a lower failure rate than the average while both Return to Learning and VTOS Leaving Certificate have a

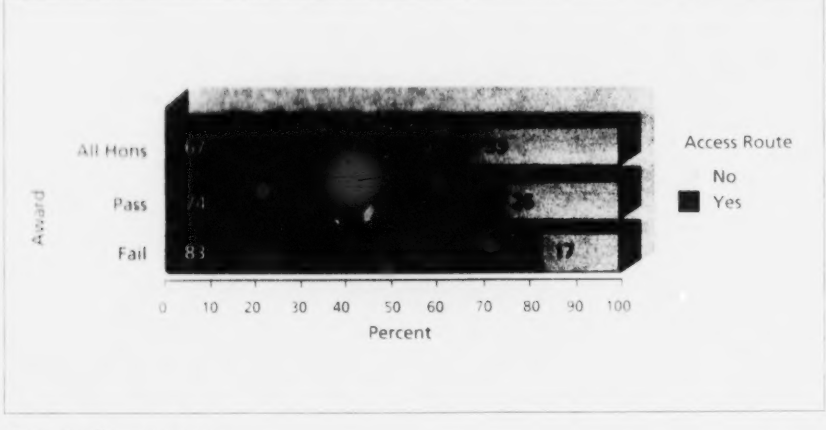
higher failure rate, with VTOS Leaving Certificate graduates looking decidedly at risk.

**Fig. 12: First Arts Examination Results 1997**




*Source: NUI Maynooth*

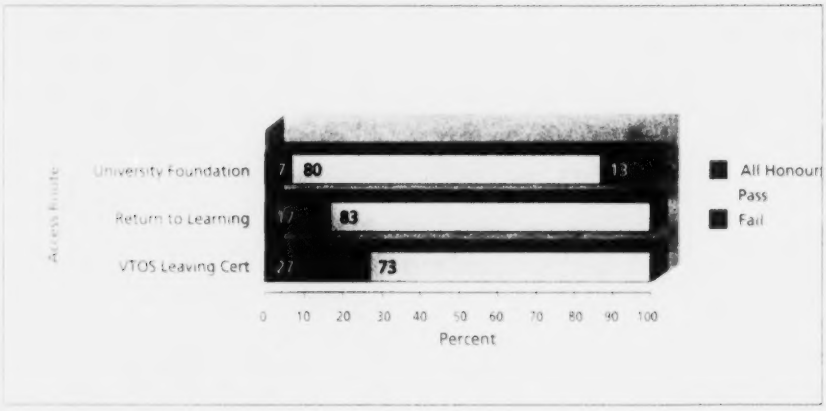
**Fig. 13: First Arts Examination Results by Access Route 1997**




*Source: Questionnaire*

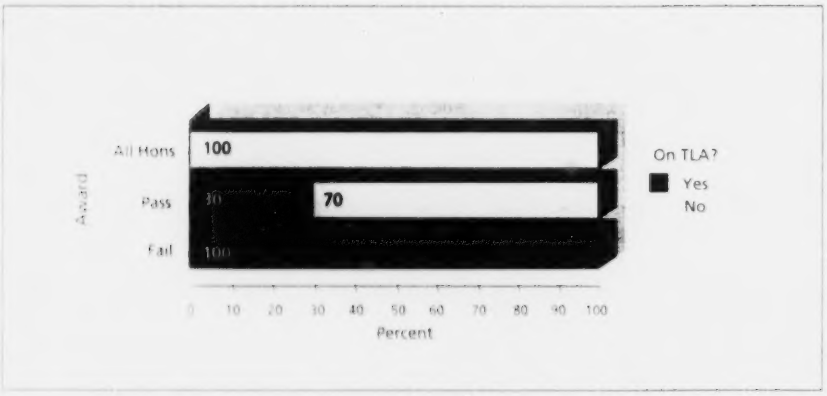
How do TLA students do at examinations? Regardless of access route, all the mature students who failed in 1997, according to our survey research, were on TLA (See Fig. 15). This is a significant finding.

Fig. 14: Access Route by First Arts Examination Results 1997




*Source: Questionnaire*

Fig. 15: First Arts Examination Results by TLA 1997




There is a correlation between the reason why people go to university and examination results. Those who go to university to gain a job-oriented qualification do significantly better at examinations than those who go to college for the sake of knowledge or self-fulfilment. Only a small percentage of those who go for job-oriented reasons fail their examinations. This is true for both 1996 and 1997 (See Fig. 16).

**Summary of Examination Results**

We have taken examination results as an important indicator of success and found data in both the survey research covering the entire three years of study towards a B.A. and the official data generated by the university. There are three important findings:

*Access Route*

a Those who did not take an access route are more likely to do better at examinations than those who did take an access course. But those who did not take an access course are mostly those with the Leaving Certificate qualifications required to matriculate.

b. Of those who did take an access route, those who completed the University Foundation course were more likely to do well than those who did not.

*TLA*

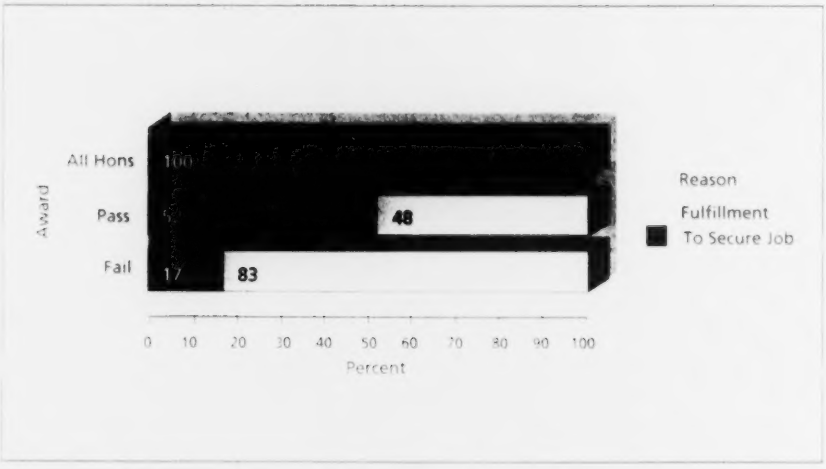
Those students on TLA are less likely to do well than those not on TLA.

*Reason for Going to University*

Those who go to university looking for a job oriented qualification are significantly more likely to do well at examinations than those who enrolled for personal fulfilment.

We will see that these findings are supported by the findings of the interviews described in the following chapter. These findings were first clearly seen in the interviews and subsequently confirmed by official college examination statistics for 1996 and 1997.

**Fig. 16 First Arts Examination Results by Reason for Going to University 1997**



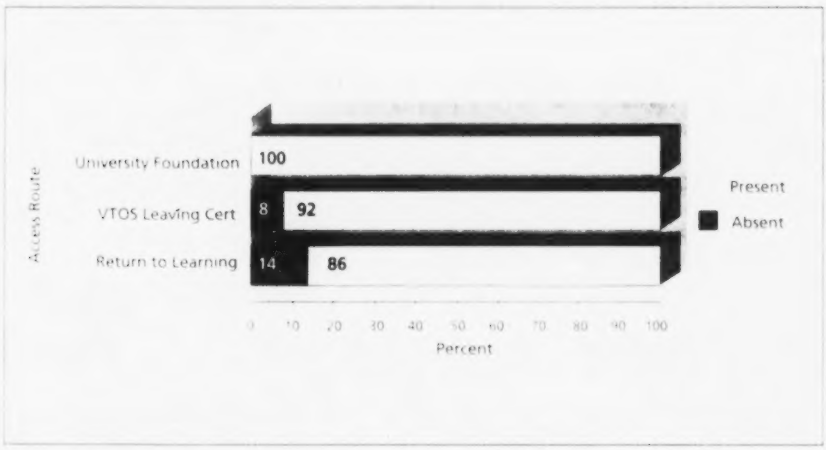

**Dropouts and Absentees from Examinations**

The official statistics for First Arts examinations indicate that in 1997 about 8 percent of the mature students dropped out. This is not signifi-

cantly more than the drop-out rate for all students in the university which is about 5 percent. In discussions with people who dropped out they all indicated medical problems as the cause and most indicated a desire to return and many have registered for 1997-1998. It could be argued that those students who have no children, fewer external commitments, near sufficient money (in their perception) and no matriculation should not be at risk. But we argue that what they do not have is the foundation course. These courses provide the cultural foundation for a successful progression through university.

A further 11 percent of first year mature students did not sit the end of year examinations. No student who took the University Foundation course as an access route was absent from the examinations at the end of the year. This confirms the previous findings regarding those who sat the examinations (See Fig. 17). Access route is a better indicator of success at college and we will build this into our overall findings: that the cause of failure and the reasons for success are about being able to negotiate one's way through university.

**Fig. 17: First Year Examination Status by Access Route 1997**




All those who were absent from examinations in 1997 were on TLA. Again this confirms our finding that TLA students are at risk.

**General Profile of Mature Students at Risk**

What is the typical profile of an "at risk student"? From these findings those on TLA, those who did not take the University Foundation (NCIR and Pearse College) course and those who go to college for the sake of learning and personal fulfilment are more at risk of failing their examinations. We also know that the students who fail are more likely to be single, have no children, and did not matriculate on the basis of the Leaving Certificate.

## 4. Present and Previous Employment Status

Thirteen percent of the respondents to the questionnaires were working *while at* university. But information gathered from focus groups and interviews indicates that this figure is much higher. Many of the respondents, particularly those on social welfare, may have been reluctant to disclose information regarding their employment status. Our finding is that only a minority of students do not work while at college.

The kind of jobs that mature students get include teaching, clerical and service jobs (See Table 4).

**Table 4: Present Job while at University**

| Job Description | Valid Percent |
|---|---|
| Teacher | 36.4 |
| Clerical | 22.7 |
| Service | 22.7 |
| Other | 18.2 |
| Total | 100 |

When looking at the jobs students held *before going to* university we found that a large number (60 percent) were unable to find a satisfactory job. Only 20 percent have had steady jobs (bank official, nurse, teacher). So, although most of our respondents have been employed for regular periods of time, the figures suggest both the absence of adequate jobs and the availability of dead-end low-wage work.

## 5. Financial Support

Just over half our respondents were on Third Level Allowance. All TLA students had a maintenance grant and this provided the main source of income for over half the mature students (See Fig. 18). Seventeen percent stated that their main financial support came from their family, and only 7 percent depend mainly on a job. Twelve percent of students depend on the grant alone. Four percent of students remain on Lone Parents Allowance and have not made the switch to TLA. We will return to the reasons for this in the interviews.

Only a small proportion of those over 45 years of age were on TLA. About two thirds of males in our research were on TLA and, in contrast, only one third of females were on TLA. Among mature students many more of the single people are on TLA than not (two-thirds to one-third roughly), while more married students are not on TLA than are (three-fifths to two-fifths). A higher proportion of these married students were women.

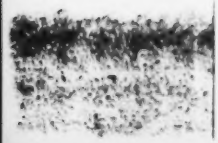
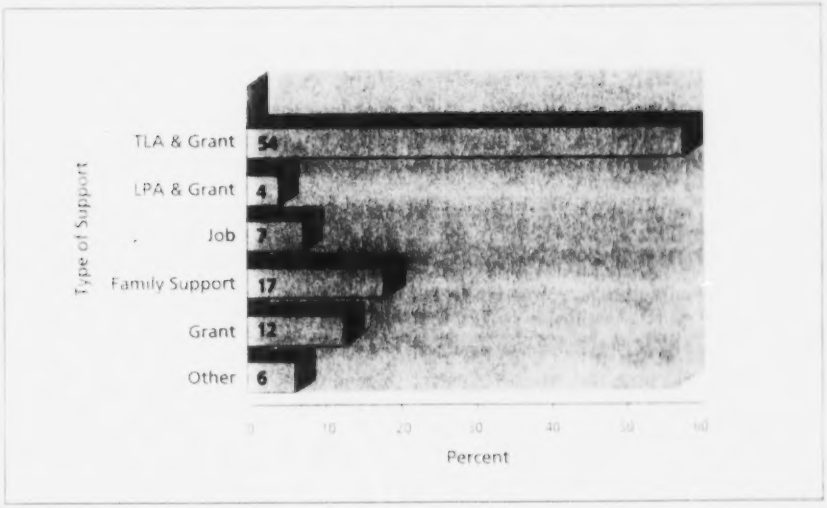


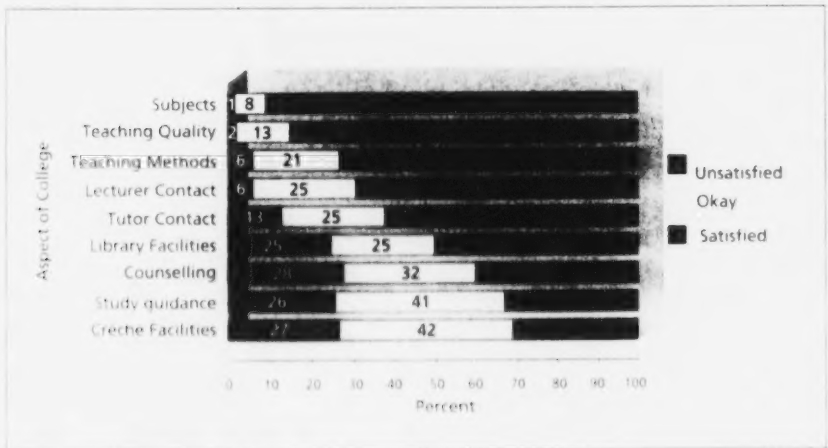
Fig. 18: Financial Support




## 6. Attitudes Towards University

The majority of students were satisfied with the subjects they had chosen, the quality and methods of teaching and contact with lecturers. But 13 percent of the mature students were either unsatisfied or very unsatisfied with tutor contact. With study guidance, counselling, crèche facilities and library facilities, we found a quarter of the mature student body were dissatisfied with the services available (See Fig. 19).

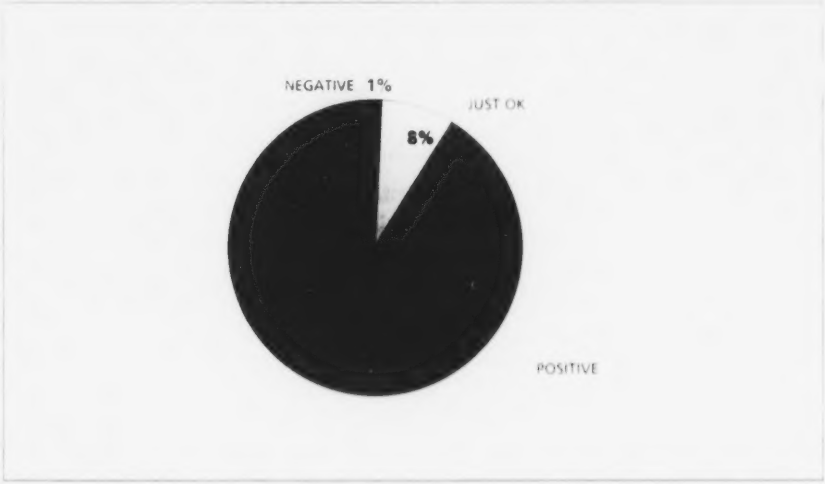
Fig. 19: Level of Satisfaction with Aspects of University



Students were generally pleased with the subjects they had chosen, but nearly a quarter of students said the least enjoyable aspect of being at university had something to do with the facilities on offer at Maynooth.

Although students were dissatisfied with some facilities, mature students' experience at Maynooth was overwhelmingly positive. Although you could suggest that the people who responded were more inclined to think this way in the first place, the argument can also be made that, if someone had grievances, they would have been likely to have expressed them in a confidential questionnaire.

Fig. 20: **Summary of University Experience**




## Conclusion

Survey research is like calling for a group photograph and snapping those who face the camera or take notice. It has all the advantages of such a snapshot but it has little to offer in terms of the before or after, in terms of catching the previous picture or the following scene. This is the data we gathered in our photocall of mature students! Of course it needs to be interpreted carefully but more importantly it needs to be placed beside the richness of the stories and experiences of these same students. In the following chapter we turn our attention to these experiences which are the primary focus of this research project.

# CHAPTER FOUR: INTERVIEW DATA

In this chapter we present the findings of the focus groups and individual interviews with mature students. The voices of the students speak for themselves. They spoke with an impressive openness and willingly shared their experience with the researchers.

The five headings under which these findings are presented broadly reflect the areas which the research brief identified. The five headings cover issues relating to:

1. Third Level Allowance and Finances;
2. Access Routes and Reasons for Going to University;
3. The Experience of Student Support;
4. Relationships and External Commitments;
5. The Learning Process.

**1. Third Level Allowance and Findings**

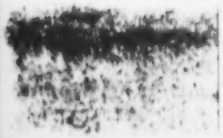
Thirteen of the twenty people interviewed were on Third Level Allowance (TLA), two were on Lone Parents Allowance (LPA) and five were on neither TLA nor LPA. These numbers more or less correspond to the statistical breakdown of the mature student population at NUI Maynooth. Along with individual interviews we met focus groups to discuss in more detail the TLA and Lone Parents experience.

Although everyone's experience of these Social Welfare schemes is different, whether one was married/single or had children/no children were the most significant factors influencing how one experienced TLA and money issues.

For example, mature students who were single with no dependants appeared to experience TLA most positively. John, a single man in his thirties, said;

> *I think the TLA works well, because I was previously unemployed, so I wasn't losing any income by taking a third-level course. I'm single, so I'd know other people would have different problems as regards finances. For myself I actually survive on what I have.*

Although students who were single experienced fewer financial worries, they did express a certain amount of confusion when it came to the welfare system. None of the single people we spoke to were clear about their social welfare entitlements or even whether they were receiving all to which they were entitled. The information they had was a result of an individual struggle and search. Information was not easily available. Ruth, a single woman in her twenties, was typical. When asked if she believed she was aware of her entitlements on TLA, she answered;



*probably not. I know as little as possible, all I know is I'm getting the money at the end of it. Somebody mentioned about a £100 book allowance, and I think I actually got it, but I can't be sure.*

Financially, people with dependants seem to have a much harder time making ends meet. Susan found that trying to get by on TLA while her husband was unemployed was not what she thought it would be;

*I was encouraged to come to college because I was told I'd get the TLA grant but what it boils down to is exactly the same as what you'd get when you're unemployed....It's difficult to keep going as a student on the same amount of money and you just get a grant to top that up, you know. But that's difficult, because you look at people who are not trying to live on that kind of money, so it should be a little bit more, at least when you come to college.*

Four of the five people who were on neither TLA nor LPA were married women. Three of these women were married to husbands with full-time jobs. In these cases, the financial worries were nothing like those of Susan. Having said that, issues of finance still played a significant role in their lives as students, and each had to find extra money in some way. Sarah survived financially by keeping on her job as a nurse;

*I work part-time...the cost of books, the cost of extra petrol coming over and back, if I had to make extra journeys, picking up the kids from school, that type of thing. So you have huge costs, about ten to fifteen pounds a week on petrol...during the time in between lectures, you've got to get something to eat, a snack during the day.*

Lone parents, on the other hand, were in a league of their own when it came to suffering from both financial stress and confusion. The distinction between LPA and TLA was a major concern as lone parents found themselves caught in the middle of a welfare policy area that they don't appear to comprehend. Although entitled to TLA, many of the lone parents we talked to decided to stay with Lone Parents Allowance. As they say themselves, they hang onto the book. Ann, a lone parent in her thirties, is a case in point. Like the others, her experiences of the welfare system have told her to stay on LPA;

*apparently I was supposed to transfer to TLA, when I started university proper, but I don't know, I'm half afraid to transfer. Now I've already been told I'm not entitled to rent allowance, I went everywhere looking for this rent allowance, and I'm afraid if I go on to TLA I definitely won't have any hope of getting it, even though they say in all the literature I've read, they say it doesn't affect your entitlements to TLA, but when I went around to my local welfare officer, he said I'm not entitled to rent allowance.*

Or another student who was told by colleagues that *I was better off just keeping the book, so I kept the book* in order to prevent perceived delays in returning to TLA if she worked during the summer holidays. By staying on LPA, however, lone parents leave themselves in an unsure position as regards their future benefits. As Ann put it;

> *there wasn't any point going onto TLA, but I'm afraid now the way the system works, will I lose something else, not that I have anything else. I thought maybe they may take the medical card, you know what I mean? That's the position I'm in. God, sure I was full sure I was entitled to a rent allowance, so I'm afraid to go on it....You have this book and you're afraid to give it up. See the red tape, I have direct experience of that red tape, I'm afraid of my life!*

Some students, who receive travel allowances from Partnership Companies, find this eases the financial burden. It does, however, cause not a little resentment from those outside partnership areas.

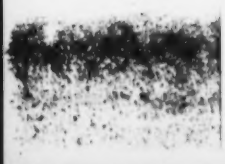
Another anomaly mentioned by one student concerned the Department of Education Maintenance Grant. The student claimed the grant while living at home, dependent and not eligible. He changed his address to live near university and so ought, it seems, to have become eligible. But the anomaly is that a change of status is not allowed for in the system! This compounds in a systematic way the geographical disadvantage mentioned in Chapter One.

Individual welfare officers can contribute to the level of confusion experienced by students and increase anxiety about entitlements. Tadhg explained what happened to him when he enquired about working during the summer break;

> *I want to find out if I can work for the summer holidays without prejudicing my TLA for next year, now I've been told I can, and I want it in writing, and I know you should never do anything that may jeopardise your income...if you start working and then stop working, have you stopped working and so voluntarily left a job, and therefore do not qualify for the dole, let alone TLA, it's all there in the book, that you can, once you sign back on in good time, but I asked the staff in [names welfare office] and they said no way, you sign off, to use the word, we'll have ya...I'd get back but it would be a very hard fight, and I'll be in third year and I don't want a hard fight.*

Mary had the same problem with her social welfare officer;

> *you see you have to be means tested to go on the Lone Parent Allowance anyway, so that was done....This is what I said to them, the person in the Social Welfare, I said what about people on FAS*



*courses? They get child minding money, rent allowance, everything, yes, they are available for work, or they are looking for work. But so am I. Well we have no provision for third level students, there might be something done about it. At the moment we have no provision for third level in terms of child minding. To me that's blatant discrimination against Lone Parents wanting to do a degree...I've talked to other Lone Parents here and they have the same problem with the childminding allowance. Nobody gets it, so it's nothing personal, except I think that rent allowance is. I think my own welfare officer just doesn't know his stuff.*

Confusion reigns for lone parents, and when it is coupled with extra financial worry (crèche, baby-sitting), it leaves them in a much different position compared to students who are single, no dependants, or married. Generally speaking, students' experience of TLA/LPA involves a considerable amount of confusion. Lone parents just experience more of it.

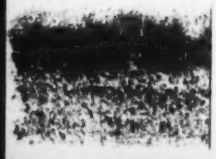
By referring back to the examination section in the statistical findings, we can shed some light on the relationship between Third Level Allowance and examination results. We recall that students on TLA were less likely to do well at exams than those who were not on TLA. We can also say that of those on TLA, it was single people with no dependants who are most at risk in terms of exam results (failure, absentees). Yet, from our interviews, we can say that it was single people with no dependants who viewed TLA most positively. We must therefore examine the possibility that financial support may not be a crucial factor in predicting examination results for the at risk category. This is only a partial finding, however, and we need to examine what students said about the other two statistically significant factors in examination results, i.e. access route taken and reason for going to university.

## 2. Access Routes and Reasons for Going to University

Out of the twenty people interviewed, fourteen took part in some form of access course before they came to Maynooth. We also met a focus group of people who were on VTOS before they came to university in order to discuss in more depth that particular preparation for university. Of the people interviewed, nine were on VTOS.

In presenting these findings, the researchers are aware, that particular findings will receive the reader's attention in a different way to others. We wish to emphasise that student's assessment of their access route, particularly VTOS, was overwhelmingly positive. This is true both of its impact on them personally and as a preparation for university. These were VTOS graduates, having now experienced at least a semester at university and in a good position to judge its usefulness.

Ann, a first year student with grown-up children, said that the university foundation course she took helped her change personally in a way she wasn't expecting;



*I learnt a lot that had nothing to do with the subjects...last year was almost like a first year in college. I used to be very tense, and lacked self-confidence. I used to worry about everything, and I seem to have left that all behind since I came to Maynooth...I seem to have left that all behind in Pearse College, because I was a bag of tension in Pearse College.*

The personal changes and increased self-confidence that people experienced on their access route are seen by them as excellent preparation for university. Alan, a single man in his thirties, believed that while he had lost his self-respect on the dole, he regained it on VTOS. One comment captures a range of experiences on VTOS, particularly the extent to which deciding social class is increasingly difficult. Downwardly mobile is a way of describing Tadhg's social class;

*Going to VTOS was a culture shock, a major culture shock. I suppose I'm from a lower-middle class background, both my parents come from small farming backgrounds. All my brothers and sisters are professional or married....I met people [on VTOS] that I had read about and assumed it to be true....Things like criminality and drugs were actually a way of life. You can read that and intellectually accept it but the reality of it is a totally different thing....I wouldn't normally walk away from a guard if I saw one, in fact I'd talk to him because it's what you do.*

Apart from personal preparation, participants also argued that their access courses were excellent preparation for study at university. *How does oxygen help life?* was one response to the question of how VTOS helped. There was clarity about how access courses helped provide this oxygen. They helped the student deal with the technical aspects of academic life. John who took the VTOS University Foundation course at NCIR had this to say;

*it was the stepping stone that I needed before I came to college. Even going from the Leaving Cert. subjects into NCIR, there was a huge gap in the standard that one needed to achieve. It gave me the opportunity to be able to sit down and have a structure that was similar to the college...I don't believe there's any difference between NCIR and the college. I had four subjects for the first year; you had the essays and the exams at the end of the year, that prepared me because I knew that I would have been overawed by college, so it gave me the confidence to go on to college....I think the skills, and being under that kind of pressure you get in college, that there's so much study, you have to apply yourself, and it gives you great insight into what it would be like when you come to college.*

Jim, a single man in his twenties, felt that the foundation course was invaluable, particularly in first year;

*[without the foundation course] I dunno if I would have left or walked out or what but I wouldn't have survived...because NCIR gives you the experience of being in a college where you're absolutely fully committed to it, and you learn all these things, essay structure, secondary reading, the whole lot; you're given it.*

Many emphasised the importance of this preparation for helping with essay writing and passing examinations. A few of the participants placed particular emphasis on the first essay at university. Having done an access course, an assignment became just another essay.

One negative aspect, if it can be called that, was the difference in atmosphere between the access course and Maynooth itself. Frequently, students referred to the individual ethos of Maynooth. For them, the VTOS experience was much more of a social thing, like a support group. Maynooth, it appears, is not as warm and cosy as the foundation courses, and according to a number of the participants, this had a detrimental effect on VTOS students, particularly in first year. Nevertheless, generally speaking, the access courses which people took, provided excellent preparation for university, both personally and academically.

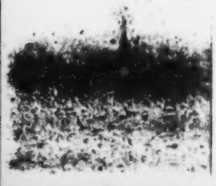
When we look at examination results, we can see that out of those who took an access route, those who did the University Foundation courses were more likely to do well at examinations than those who took either the Return to Learning or the VTOS Leaving Certificate courses. The findings from our interviews and focus groups make sense in the context of this statistical finding. From talking to mature students, it would appear that the closer the access route came to first year at university, the more it was subjectively experienced as a good preparation for university. Conversely, the closer the access course was to an adult education approach in terms of content and method, the less likely it was to be seen as a good preparation for the tasks involved in first year. "Social," "support group" and "warm and cosy" are not what the university is about.

**Reasons for Going to University**

We found that the reasons students had for going to university was a significant factor in examination results. Generally, from our interviews, when we asked about the reasons for going to university we found that mature students fell, more or less evenly, into three different groupings:

(i) those who had wanted to go before but only now is the **right time**;
(ii) those who wanted **a qualification** for job-related reasons;
(iii) those who wanted **to prove** they could get a degree.

Relating this to Figure 11 in Chapter Three, we can place (i) and (iii) in the knowledge, fulfilment, lifelong ambition category, as they both view their time at university as not primarily jobs-market oriented.



**(i) Right Time**

Married women and lone parents account for most of this group, with their children playing an important role in deciding when was the "right time" to go to university. Sarah explained;

> *what really changed my mind about coming back, [was] when the children reached the age of "what am I going to do and where am I going." When they reached that age of having to make the decision of what they were going to do, around fifteen or sixteen, I had to actually go to the books, looking up career guidance, and I had so much trouble and got so involved, in order to give them guidance.*

For Julie, her own childrens' education had a knock-on effect on her own aspirations;

> *I actually did the Return to Learning course first on my own, and then when I got into it, I thought, gosh, we had the option of applying to Maynooth. So I thought I'll do that, and I had intended doing...initially I was going to do it when the children were older, but then I thought, no, I'll keep going now until I finish, and then my daughter started school, so I thought we'd all go (laughs).*

Ann was different and waited until all her children were grown up. When asked why she went to university, she replied;

> *To fulfil a dream of course. I always wanted to go, I always had a great desire to go to college, and never had the time until the kids grew up, my mother was a working mother, and I said, as a mother, I would never do that.*

We will comment later on the way women's experience is affected by relationships.

For Susan and Jim, it was the introduction of TLA which convinced them that it was the "right time" to think seriously about university. Susan had a lifelong ambition, but had been frustrated in her previous efforts. According to her, VTOS and TLA helped make her dream a reality;

> *I always wanted to go to college from the time I was young. My mother, ehm, said that it was foolish, but the money was there, and when I brought it up me father, he said your mother looks after the girls...Well, I was an adult, and I could make my own decisions, you know ...actually, I kinda got a different way of looking at life. I thought well if I want to do it, it must be possible, and I was led to believe by things like the TLA grant and I had a neighbour that was involved in setting up dolebusters and she told me to go back to Pearse College, and that was good, when I went back to Pearse College, I was on the VTOS.*

Jim also found that his family upbringing had stunted his desire for more learning. In his case, it was only when he heard of a foundation course, that he could attend through VTOS, that he started to consider university as a serious option;

> *I had always been reading ever since I was this height, always loved books, I had a difficult childhood which made me leave school, but when I left school I still kept reading, and when I went to [names city], a lot of my friends were working in the hotels but they were also doing part-time courses, and I was thinking: How come this job is my life and it's not theirs? So I got interested in doing some kind of part-time course when I was in [names city], moved to [names city] and contacted the local colleges, but didn't like [names city], but the idea stayed with me, and when I came back to Ireland, it was by accident I saw an ad for the course in NCIR, and went for it...I knew it was a course to prepare you for university, I didn't want to do a course that would lead nowhere.*

It is always impressive to hear students talk about overcoming boundaries that were set to their ambitions. John was one such student but always thought university was utopia;

> *When I was at school, at about the age of ten, a teacher turned around and said, there are certain people born to be carpenters, there are certain people born to be bakers. So if you have something instilled in yourself, it's very hard to get away from that. So obviously, that you have a right to that [go to college] or that you come from that [experience], the utopia of it. It's an unobtainable goal. So I had to achieve it.*

The experience of women is made worse by unequal treatment, in Caroline's case, by her own family;

> *Only four of us were learning Latin for the Leaving Cert. in my class with the intention perhaps of going to college. But there were seven of us at home and my parents decided that the money should go to the boys rather than the girls....so us girls....*

**(ii) Qualification**

Other mature students we talked to saw the degree as a qualification which would allow them change career. Most of these students had no particular job or career in mind; they just wanted to get out of their present situation. In the survey questionnaire we found that 60 percent of respondents spent their previous working lives in dead-end low-waged jobs. Most of the people who came to Maynooth for a job-related reason form part of that 60 percent. Irene, for instance, attended another college but never finished, and found herself in a place where she didn't want to be;

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

*I always wanted to finish, I had regretted not finishing at [names college], although I know now it wasn't the course for me, but I knew I couldn't be happy without some form of education, and in a very banal type of job, I wanted something, and I couldn't get that if I didn't go back, so I knew I was going back it was just a case of when, I had two more kids in between, I just knew I was coming back.*

Trish, however, was looking for a better job;

*I was working in [names where she worked], I had a couple of good jobs, but the barrier was I didn't have adequate education to forward myself in jobs I was in, although I had experience, and I had a lot of personal crises at the time so I decided that I would move back to Ireland, and my dad decided to pay the fees at the time.*

Noleen, of similar age to Trish, although with no children, had spent her twenties in jobs that were also going nowhere. She described her reason for going to university like this;

*it's for interest, I kinda drifted into office jobs years ago, and drifted from one to the other...I did my Leaving Cert. I didn't do well in my Leaving. I left school after the Inter and kind of did my Leaving in one year, didn't do great and wasn't interested in college, wasn't interested anyway. I wanted to go out and make money, be independent. I survived, grand, no problems, but I found basically that I was drifting into things I'm not choosing, so I decided to come back to college and do something I chose to do, so it's interest more than anything.*

Tadhg, after working all his adult life, found himself redundant due to his lack of qualifications;

*When I went into VTOS I was still doing interviews, I'm a [....] by profession, and it became obvious after a couple of weeks that nobody really wanted to know me, they know I have experience, but they want third level.*

The status attached to a degree was something that Liam also encountered, but in a much more subtle way than Tadhg;

*when I actually came in, my plan was, get a degree and probably go back and work in [names place where he worked before]. I wouldn't be so sure of that now. When I was working in [names place], I did notice that people who had degrees were taken more seriously than the people who didn't, and that had a fair bit to do with it.*

**(iii) Proof**

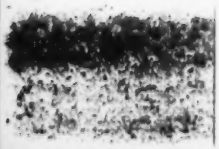
This final group of students differed in that they had a desire to prove that they were able to get a university degree. Children and issues about a qualification do play a role in these students' decisions, but they all expressed a desire to validate their own ability, over and above any other reason. It should be pointed out here that this group, along with the "qualification" group, are taken from the ranks of the 60 percent of respondents who had previous occupations they described as manual/clerical/service jobs.

All the students in this category came from working-class backgrounds, and all started for the first time to consider going to university during their time on VTOS. The following quote, from Mary, illustrates how the VTOS course changed her perception of both university and her own abilities;

> *I always had this suspicion that I was stupid, I've had it in me head for years, I suppose it's the way I was taught in school, I dunno. Anyway, blame everybody else except yourself, but I had it in me head that I was stupid, and I had it in me head that to do a degree course you had to be brilliant. But this is a gas, the way it turned out. But the first day I was in class, I was looking around, and seeing these people speaking very well, I've always been intimidated by people speaking very well, went straight to the counsellor,...and I said they're all too intelligent for me, I'll have to leave, and he started laughing, and said go back into the class, so I went back in, and it ended up, the two people that I thought were very intelligent, really and truly, one of them failed. Now you can't fail it, I mean they do anything to pass ya, give you a fecking certificate, but they won't give you high marks, and I ended up getting the highest in the class, me and another fella, so I said I can do this, it was a big turning point in me whole life, like I would have said I was never an academic, but I must be, as I was able for it, you know what I mean, and better than most. Now I'm just being honest, I'm not boasting.*

Alan's formal schooling left him with a bad taste in his mouth. VTOS helped to instil self-confidence and persuaded him that university was a definite possibility;

> *well, the reason I went onto the (VTOS) Leaving Cert. was the fact that I had decided that, being told you got no proper work skills is bad enough, but being told that you're not particularly well educated is a whole different kettle of fish. So I decided to go back, it was the most frightening twenty minutes I've ever spent walking up and down outside the school gate. It was the best two years of my life, and I can say that they were actually more enjoyable than my time in college, the teachers gave me confidence and belief in myself, and then there's aspects, talents,*



*I'd always realised I had and they came to the fore as well in some subjects that I'd done like art.*

When Alan was growing up, university seemed like another country entirely, a place where people like himself were not allowed;

*I noticed that there were young people today on a day trip and they wandered around the college looking at everybody as if they had two heads, and I would have been like that as well because you would have felt that it was beyond cloistered walls and you didn't realise what went on there, and you thought it was for privileged people, which now that I've experienced it, I think that that's not necessarily true now, but I don't know about twenty years ago, that silver spoon may have been a factor in working-class people's perception.*

Ruth could not believe the difference between VTOS and her secondary school. As she put it, *without VTOS, I wouldn't have thought I was capable of going to Third Level. Never! It wouldn't have crossed my mind.* VTOS helped her to regain her academic confidence after her painful experience of school;

*it was quite exciting on the whole because there were a lot of teachers who were interested in what they were doing, and it does take effect when you have, the whole philosophy behind it, and it's on a one-to-one basis, and for the first time in my life in a class I didn't feel intimidated. I could actually speak my mind and to realise that I had a point of view, I had an opinion that people wanted to hear, and it was important to hear, and it was my first time experiencing it, it really was. In school, I was a kind of person who couldn't say anything because they were ready to down you or whatever you said, so I kept my mouth closed right through school. So it was great.*

It was really VTOS which allowed these students to feel confident about their own ability, and in turn, encouraged them to view access to university as a real possibility.

Returning to the statistical findings, we found that those in the second group, i.e. those who came to university looking for a qualification and a career upgrade/change were more likely to do well at university than those in either of the other two categories. The job-oriented students were much more task oriented than those who came because it was the right time or because they wanted proof of their own abilities. In talking about their experiences, it is apparent that "qualification" people are much more practical about what university has to offer them, and much less in awe of what a university stands for, than those who go for other reasons. The university ideals of critical thinking and reflection are not a major part of the agenda for those students who view a university degree as a way out of low-pay, low-status employment.

We have connected student's experience of financial support, access route and reasons for going to university with our examination results. When we look at the interviewees' individual exam results, we find our qualitative data corroborates our statistical findings. The "at-risk" category in our interviewees (including those who failed or were absent) were more likely to be on TLA (80 percent), to have come to university for personal fulfilment (80 percent), not to have done a foundation course (60 percent) and to be single with no dependants (60 percent). We will come back to these findings later in this chapter when we discuss the Learning Process.

### 3. The Experience of Student Support

We now turn to the support students experienced while at university. Though there are some overlaps, we can talk about three groupings of mature students:

(i) those who have received support from **other mature students**;
(ii) those who felt supported in the main by **family;** and
(iii) those who see themselves as making it themselves or **on their own.**

#### (i) Other Mature Students

Many students form their own support groups with other mature students, which according to them, helped both personally and academically. For instance, Tadhg, who is separated from his wife, felt that;

> *without your fellow mature students, you can't survive, it's a continuous thing of talking, of affirmation, of confirmation, it's absolutely ongoing...academically we take notes for each other, we look out for each other, one woman noticed something in [names source] and photocopied it for everyone, just a small thing to do for [names an assignment].*

Sarah, a married woman, agreed with this perception of student support, and argued that it is the cohesion of her group which had a major bearing on her own success at university;

> *I think within the group, we tried to support ourselves, the group we actually formed at the beginning...when you were having a hard time, whether it was at home, or whether it was the work, discussing it, and I think it's vital. We were all attending all the same lectures practically, and we would always have a cup of coffee in the coffee shop, and it's important that the other people in the group are as single minded as you are. Because we know of another group, where every single one of them left, when one went the others went, they were picked off, slowly but surely.*

Julie regretted not being a part of a group, and she believed it had an adverse effect on her examination results;

*I know they (groups) were on, I didn't go to them, because I felt I had to be home for the kids. And I'm kind of sorry that I didn't go to them now, because I heard they were flying around essays between them. I isolated myself really, I was caught between two stools, I was trying to do too much. Whereas I would have been better off if I had just stayed down here for another hour and said, give me those essays. Essays were flying around the place and I never got one of them and it was only afterwards people were saying why didn't you ask for this?*

The formation of groups seems to be a common feature of first year at university. Some of the participants, however, pointed out that these groups generally tend to fall by the wayside in second year, where students become more individualistic. It seems age plays a factor here. According to Michael, a young single-man, many mature students;

*are in competition, one or two will help, but by and large, mature students are a devious bunch (laughs)...these would be the under-thirties - more career minded and nothing's going to get in their way.*

There is also some evidence that students are taking grinds in order to get through the examinations.

**(ii) Family**

Some of the participants in our study got enormous support from their families and close friends. Trish got moral and practical support from her husband and children;

*my husband is very supportive, he thinks it's great, and I think that's probably helped me an awful lot you know. The house falls apart and we all have to tackle the ironing, the washing, the cleaning, and that sort of thing, but he does, he's behind me all the way, and I think the children are quite pleased, oh! our mom's a student...*

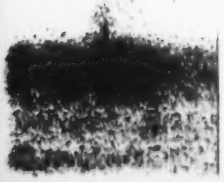
Susan explains it in a different way;

*the support of my family, I had to have that, but I had to change as well, I was always very independent but I had to let the sisters have the kids.*

In order to get support *from* family, she had to give up what she saw as some of her support *for* her own family.

Jim survived college life with the aid of his girlfriend;

*I don't really get involved in mature student organisations, so I can't really comment on that, but that is my choice, I don't have*



*the interest. Obviously I am a mature student, but I don't consider myself an old mature student, I don't associate myself with people who are the same age as my parents. I'd rather associate with people my own age. Secondly, I have a personal life, I live with my girlfriend, so I don't really need to associate with people here, I don't associate with people here at all.*

**(iii) On Their Own**

This third group is quite distinct from those who received support from other mature students or family, in that, willingly or not, they have generally had to make it on their own. Paul puts it this way;

*I'm sure the support is there, but I'm not a joiner...I suppose that, if you've been doing things on your own, like I have, it's difficult to relate to team situations...generally speaking I tend to hightail it out of here after lectures.*

Others, such as Ruth, who was single, saw herself as someone who has unwittingly coped on her own. She discovered she had dyslexia in first year, and felt that her academic department was not supportive enough;

*in terms of the institution, no I'm not supported...but especially last year, when I failed, I felt no backup...I was actually gutted basically, and I needed motivation to get me going again and I had to do it on my own.*

This perception, that there is little institutional support, brings us to an interesting point. The mature students generally did not refer to the institution when it came to talking about support. They had to be prompted concerning support from lecturers or tutors. When prompted, however, they were usually quite positive. For instance, John felt that;

*Maynooth was more open to mature students, they are aware that matures can have different problems, and the college itself is mature student friendly...if I go to one of the lecturers, or if I go to the tutorial and say, I have a problem, they'll listen...I feel that I'm treated as a mature student as well.*

There was some criticism of the counselling provision in the college. Alan was typical;

*I feel that some of us (matures) have a lot riding on our exam results. I feel that there needs to be a more high-profile counselling service you can go to...two people killed themselves here in the last two years...there needs to be proper support networks.*

Our questionnaires confirm that Alan was not alone in criticism as only 40 percent of mature students were satisfied with counselling facilities at Maynooth.

So, when pressed, mature students discussed the support of the college, but their own experience of support is of their families and colleagues. Each of the three groups of students found their own ways of negotiating the stresses and strains of university life, generally without the support of the university, and really on their own terms. In many ways, these mature students have taken control of their own lives within the university, in a way that provides them with the support that they need.

### 4. Relationships and External Commitments

Mature students who are single generally do not experience any major problems arising from external commitments. Those who had jobs, worked as a financial necessity, but this did not seem to have a major impact on their academic life. Mark however was an exception and had a job;

> *I make ends meet because of my teaching, if I didn't have that I wouldn't be able to cope because I have loads of bills...I do about 18-20 hours of teaching a week...I have curtailed the teaching, I had to because it was affecting my study...I'm working in the black economy, if I had to pay tax, I wouldn't be able to do it.*

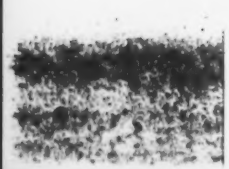
It was usually at home that issues arose for students, both married and lone parent. In the literature review, we found that role negotiation in terms of family and domestic life were of paramount importance in the lives of students, particularly women. We observed these role negotiations in our own study, and they manifested themselves in the three themes which came to the fore as mature students talked about familial commitments:

(i) Resentment;
(ii) Guilt;
(iii) Marital Difficulties.

#### (i) Resentment

Sarah, who is married, saw a difference in the way men and women negotiated their family and partner relations as a result of being at university;

> *we have three fellas in our group, granted two of them are separated, but there is no comparison, they never, ever, ever, think about the children, they never ever have to think about the home. As a matter of fact, I had one chap the last day commenting on the wife that was upset over something. Bring her a bunch of flowers, was his comment, and I thought, typical men (laughs). You know everything is sorted with a bunch of flowers. But really they can protect themselves much more, but we can't. You could do it, but it wouldn't be the right thing to do....They would have much greater detachment from the children and from the home*



*than we would. We are continually faced with the responsibility of picking them up from school, having to make sure that they get there, having to make sure that they get their homework done. In the evening, you talk about getting time to study. When I go home, I have to get the dinner. I have to sit down then and do the homework with the children, and that can take up until after nine o'clock at night, you know.*

By changing her priorities as she went along Caroline coped;

*I say to myself, think twice before you lose your head, think twice before you start screaming about the state of the house because they won't be correcting that at the end of the year, and how important is it anyway, you know, so I suppose I'm a little more calm, but then again, there is still a lot of pressure.*

Julie has seen how her own personal changes have affected her partner;

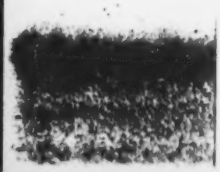
*my partner turned around to me and said "I don't like you anymore" and I laughed and asked why, and he says "I don't like you anymore since you went to that college" and I said why, and he says, "you're asking questions, you're analysing everything. I can't open my mouth without you going why, define that for me" (laughs). He sees the change.*

She also talked about how her children were affected;

*there's been a total change over. I was two weeks in here, and my son came up to me and asked me where his shirt was, and I said it's always hanging up, and why are you always asking me that. I was like a devil, and he went into his wardrobe, and there was none there, and I asked him had he no white shirt, and he said no, and I said, well you'll just have to learn how to use the washing machine (laughs).*

Susan also experienced some resentment from her family;

*I discovered that there was a different way of looking at things, and that there's a way around things, that you can do what you want to do but there's a price to be paid all right, emotional price more so than financial. Well, it's more like, you change. My son would say, you're talking like that again mom, in the Maynooth way, you know (laughs) and I don't understand what you're saying, and I'm doing that and I don't realise I'm doing it, and I can't stop myself from doing it to fit in with them. It used to annoy me, I used to get hurt by it really, 'cause I was striving to move on and what they're trying to do is pull me back.*



Sarah, also experienced resentment from her children, but in a different form;

> *the other thing that I find the toughest is telling the children that I'll be late to pick you up or won't be able to pick you up. The youngest is ten, but the youngest one, because I was late once, he never forgot, and he comes back every time, that was twelve months ago, and he comes back every time.*

So, for Sarah, as for most of the other women quoted here, it was primarily their role as mothers and homemakers that came into conflict with college life, and it is this gender dimension that appears to be most pertinent when we examine the relationship between college and domestic life.

**(ii) Guilt**

Guilt too was a gender issue. Some women, both married and lone parents, talked of feeling guilty. Irene thought her biggest failure was towards her family and children. As she put it;

> *failure towards my family, the time you can give to your children, and well, I'm married as well, and to your housework, and I failed in all of that (laughs).*

What Irene is saying here is that academic studies, when conflicting with home life, generally tends to win out in the end, even to the point of upsetting her marriage. The significance of this experience of guilt should not be underestimated as it impinges on the process of negotiating a path through one's commitments and relationships.

**(iii) Marital Difficulties**

Of the twenty people we interviewed, six were either married, going through a separation, or recently separated. Three have had marital difficulties while at university. Fifty percent of our sample of married mature students spoke about the impact that going to university had on their relationship with their partner. The review of the literature pointed to a body of research which confirmed this. Edwards (1993) put the figure at 25 percent, but in our own study, that statistic is doubled. Tadhg said that college life put unbearable strain on his marriage;

> *spousal/partner relationships, they are the major problems. The other issues are minor compared to that, people break up or come near to breaking up. You're living a life that has no basis in reality to a person outside the academic field. They can't comprehend it, and you're calling down to a house and you've had excitement and they have four walls, hello wall, and that's it...spouses recognise it, yet they can't help complaining, yet if they don't, it's up...there's going to be major pressure.*

Susan saw a connection between her going to college and her separation from her partner;

> *what happened was I wasn't communicating...I stopped communicating at home, particularly with my husband. I'd say, look, work it out for yourself, so that blew up that and it was difficult for him.*

As a result her college work deteriorated, but she did not alert her tutors to this. As she put it;

> *I could have made them aware of it, but it isn't their job, but I didn't make them aware of it, and so it was unexplainable to them the way my work deteriorated.*

Irene's husband believed she put her studies before everything else.

Relationships and external commitments are found to have a disproportionate effect on the stability of marital relations. Our literature research suggested this too, with students constantly having to balance their roles in different settings, in order to be successful at college. It appears that, for these students, university wins out in the end.

**5. The Learning Process**

What learning process do mature students go through as they study at university? What do they learn during their studies? These are probably the most significant questions we investigated, as the primary role of the mature student at university is to become a learner. Indeed, one of the most intriguing aspects of the literature review was the way in which students attempted to meet both their own learning needs, their "learner identity" as Susan Weil put it, and the needs of the college, the "learning context." The students in Weil's study (and others) found there was dissonance between these identities. Our study confirms these findings.

We go further and argue that what exists between the individual mature student, with their reservoir of experiential knowledge, and the college, with its highly structured theoretical knowledge, is a latent conflict that manifests itself in various ways. In this study we found that this conflict emerged most strongly in the early part of the course, i.e. in first year. The early part of the first term was particularly crucial for the way in which this conflict was resolved and was for many a make or break period in university. This conflict surfaced most clearly in relation to essay writing and study skills, the two areas which caused major anxiety for students and created dissonance for their learner identity. We also got a clearer picture of what it was that students learned and we will return to this later.

**Essay writing**

The first essay of the year appears to be a rite of passage for mature students, many of them experiencing a high level of anxiety, with regard to both its structure and content. Michael explained it in this way;

> *the first essay was a problem [got 59 percent]. I think I wrote it about four times, like, same contents but I rearranged them, and then I went back to the first one and said they can have it like this and to hell with them, just got to the stage, I was going around in circles and worrying about it too much, and I said if it's right it's right, and if it's wrong it's wrong.*

Much of the anxiety experienced by mature students was caused by not knowing what was expected of them. The traditional academic structure of an essay and its content with an emphasis on both description and analysis, is taken for granted knowledge by those who have worked in the academic field for a longer time. Kevin was made aware of what was required of him when he handed in his first essay;

> *my history tutor in first year, she was excellent, and when she handed my essay back, and when I read it, I couldn't believe I had written it, it was like a sixteen year olds. I had a bit of a clash with what I felt I should write. I think it was a lack of confidence in my ability to write. I kind of stopped myself writing....It was basically a narrative with no references, no quotations. I had given my own interpretation...I suppose that had to do with my own view of education being participatory.*

*A nightmare* is how Julie described the experience of her first essay. In the following quote, she provides a stark portrayal of the kinds of problems mature students face when their understanding of what is expected of them does not coincide with that of their lecturers and tutors. She did not do as well as she hoped in her first essay;

> *I was at a talk and there was a woman talking, and she said she cried over an essay, and I laughed and thought, cry over an essay?....I could never make it to the bridge, tears, God, and I thought "cop yourself on" and I was terrified someone would see me....and there were roadworkers, and seriously I nearly died. Got to a phone anyway...and I said get [sisters names] to ring me. Nobody rang me until it was ten o'clock at night and I was going round in floods of tears getting the dinner.... Half ten at night I was still crying, my younger sister rang, and I answered the phone and told her I hadn't stopped crying since half eleven that morning, and she went, what? And I said I'm never going back there again. The amount of work I put in to the essay, and she (the lecturer) just said to me, you just passed it, and it was like putting a knife in my back, and she went, oh for god's sake, and she turned around and said, that's the thing about mature students.*

*And I went what do you mean? And she went, you take everything to heart...it was a major shock just passing it, 'cause I had done a lot of work...I went up to the lecturer and said to her, I can't do this (the essay), and she said just go home and write from the heart, so I went home and wrote this flowery essay...*

When Julie and Liam both wrote their essays in a flowery and personalised way they had not yet learned that what was required was a more de-personalised content and style. Achieving this brought better essay marks. Mary also had trouble with essays, but she did much better, precisely because she de-personalised the essay-writing process. As she puts it, the first essay;

*nearly killed me, I got 68 but it nearly killed me doing it cause I never did an essay, it was a different thing. I mean I don't know about analysing, from all I knew, even on the diploma course, that was just facts, facts, facts, it took a lot, I had to twist my whole mind around, but I did very well in it.*

This *twisting the mind* around to suit the wishes of the academic faculty is a major factor influencing their success or failure. We will return to this issue. Another issue needs to be considered first. This is what students call the course load. Others, who had completed foundation courses, agreed that they helped, but many thought it didn't prepare them enough;

*the course helped me in terms of organising and structuring essays, but still it doesn't really prepare you. The volume that's thrown at you here is completely different from the foundation course.*

The course load combined with the problem of how to structure essays affected mature students, particularly near Christmas. Many of the other interviewees pointed to the essay load as a major cause of stress, and John had his own way of dealing with the pressure;

*it was spelt out in different lectures that one may proceed when you're told that you have an essay due in say five weeks, that the time to prepare for it is now, not in four weeks. I actually prepare and go to the library there and then when I receive an essay, and I go to my own library, I do it there and then, rather than have the pressure. I think the longer you leave it, the more pressure you put on yourself, because you still have more essays coming through.*

So, students, particularly in first year, have to struggle on two fronts:

a) understanding what is expected of them; and
b) coping with the course load.

An ability to manage both is a definite pre-requisite for success.

**Study-skills**

Students must learn how to study and quickly develop learning skills if they are to succeed. Tadhg, when asked why he felt people failed at college, had this to say;

> *I think they failed to grasp...they missed what it was, it's a very subtle thing, I know a few people who failed, who you know were just off centre, they weren't grasping, they were working very hard, but they weren't working at what they should have been, but they weren't concentrating...they should have been doing half an hour instead of two hours, the same people tend to grasp the wrong idea, the lecturer is saying something, and he's saying it in black and white, I want you to do the following, and he'd say it that slow, and they don't pick it up, and I think it's concentration.*

What is this very subtle thing that Tadhg is talking about? Let John explain;

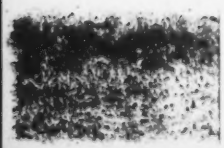
> *the one insight that I had was that you can't do everything, and there's certain areas that you zone in on, there are certain areas that are more important...it was something that one of the lecturers said. Someone said, don't read whole books, read chapters.*

Jim also learnt in his first year at college that there was no need to take down everything the lecturer says. Irene agreed, adding that what you take down during lectures is fundamental to success. She got 75 percent in her first essay by making information her own. She got to this stage;

> *first of all, by a desire to get through first year. I knew that I had to do more than just give back the facts if I was going to get good grades, so, also being interested in what I was doing, and wanting to go beyond what I was given...(learnt this) mostly from what the lecturers were saying. To get the good marks you have got to give a critique. I just knew that it would be enough to get an honour, but not a first class honour.*

In many ways, what these mature students are doing here is learning the tricks of the trade, learning what we call *college knowledge*. The ability of students to learn this knowledge is a determining factor in their success. Trish, in her twenties, gave a good example of this;

> *we were asked to study a particular diagram in class, and learn it off, and this older friend of mine was saying, that arrow shouldn't be there, and I was saying, it's there so just learn it that way, and she was going, but why is it there and I said, I don't know and don't care, just learn it so you can regurgitate it in the exams and get marks for it....She wanted to know the mechanisms and the nitty gritty of it, which would need a bit more knowledge than anyone would have in*



*second year....It wasn't necessary to know the nitty gritty in second year, and by asking why, she was actually dragging herself deeper into the mire.*

So Trish felt that she could *run with the hare and dash with the hounds*. It is very clear that, for her, the dissonance between her own learner identity and the college identity was diminished. It was a conscious process for her. The only way she could reduce the dissonance and get through college was to give the college what they wanted - *college knowledge*. She put it clearly when she named the two kinds of learning;

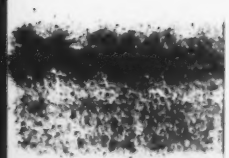
*Yeah, one is the monkey business and the other is the research....In Departments, each person is looking for something different and you can do the monkey business for one lecturer and the research for another....It's a question of finding the dynamic equilibrium between the two of them...it's about passing your exams as a means to an end....I knew what was necessary to pass this time.*

In contrast, Paul did not learn some of these tricks of the trade and did not learn how to play the game properly. He, as a result, had to repeat first year because of the way he approached the writing of his examination questions. As he explains;

*the head of [names Department] couldn't understand why I failed, and they were really worried. They thought they had got the marks wrong or something. They said I had attended the lectures. I got these great results in my essays, and then they looked at my exam papers and they found that I was averaging a page and a half per answer, and it's just not on, you know...I learnt to give lot longer answers basically (laughs). Skill in the economy of space.*

It is the learning of skills such as the one Paul described that is the major academic experience of mature students at college. This process of skills learning, however, is really only a manifestation of the underlying latent conflict between these mature learners and the learned of the college. Noleen, although generally positive about college, felt that there should be more to university learning than just the processing of facts and figures;

*I've learnt an awful lot but one of the frustrating things I find about college is the lack of time to go and do anything in any depth. There's the feeling that we're just kind of scraping the surface....There's an awful lot of keeping up with things rather than getting into them. I kind of feel that when I've left, I'll have a superficial knowledge of some things, rather than something more....Maybe it does change in third year, but so far it feels like school, you're getting through a system rather than going into something...I think in first year, where everybody was kind of*



*thinking, hang on a second, how much are we being told not to think, and how much are we thinking. I don't think it's as important now, maybe we've just settled in it more, maybe it's working (laughs) or maybe we've just figured we can make up our own minds.*

The process mature students go through in attaining these skills is one of constant compromise with the demands of the college, of a giving in to an authority which will not accept their experiential knowledge. It is important to point out in this instance that the college never compromises. The students themselves are always on the losing end, and the process of skills learning, of playing the game, is the only realistic way students have of losing less.

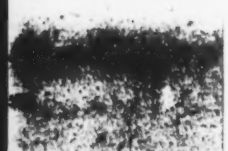
In this section, we have quoted from eleven of the students we interviewed. This is just a sample of what we found but the experiences of the other nine interviewees were similar. Of this eleven, four found adjusting to the learning process decidedly more difficult than the rest. Writing essays and passing exams were harder for these students than the others. But Kevin, Julie, Trish and Paul had one thing in common: They experienced much more dissonance between their own identity as learners and the college identity. In Kevin's experience, it was the lack of participation in the learning process that created problems. For Julie, this dissonance manifested itself in the rejection of an experiential approach to essay writing. In Brendan's case, it was his focus on content and argument over presentation that caused him to fail first year exams. Trish is probably the most interesting case in that she failed first year previously as a school leaver. This time around she had no problems in passing exams and writing essays. She also had no rosy conception of what university could offer her in terms of learning and critical reflection. It is Trish who understands the learning process as *running with the hare and dashing with the hounds*. She can now tell the difference between *monkey business* and *research*. Negotiating her way around *college knowledge* is no longer a problem.

The next chapter will link these findings about college knowledge and examination results with those on TLA, and with access route and the reason for going to university.

**What did Students Learn?**

Apart from learning study skills, essay writing, structuring written work and deepening content, students also learned how to be more critical. As one student said;

*I loved the novels and the plays, and the way you had to read around them....and you know, you'd never read a book the same again. I'd never just pick up a book and read it word for word, you do definitely think more.*



Students speak well about what they learned.

> *The first thing I would say is that your mind is so much broader, it's much more open, you take nothing at face value. You question everything because that's something you're taught....you question everything, why is this and why did this happen, or maybe there's another story behind it.*

Students searching for meaning, escaping the boredom of housework or other low status work find in Maynooth the kind of critical knowledge which allows them make sense of two different areas. Firstly, it throws light on their own personal situations such as marriage breakdown, unemployment and child abuse. These are experienced as part of their own life story and meanings are found which contextualise these experiences. Secondly, these and other issues are also interpreted and meanings found which are broader and deeper and more complex than before. Poverty, social class, third world issues, race are all typical of the issues which get re-understood. John is not typical in the way he bridges the personal and the social but he does capture the range of learnings that are happening;

> *I think people who come to college are here to learn, not just academically, but also here to learn as individuals...When I go to the cafe, we will not just talk about history, we will also talk about ourselves....It's about me as a person, me growing as a person, it's about me looking at my world, and me growing in that....I believe it gives me a better insight into people. But it also gives me a better insight into society.... If you're talking about class, my father worked in factories. I never thought that when I left school at 14, that I would ever achieve a place in college, it would have been utopia....I want to obtain learning....And I want to actually give it back.*

**Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a description of the experiences of mature students at university in their own words. In the interviews we sought their experiences under five major headings. These headings were suggested by the research brief. In Chapter Three we presented statistical data both from the survey research and official college sources. In the following section we will attempt to integrate the findings of these two chapters and comment on them.

# *Section Three*
# *Commentary*

---

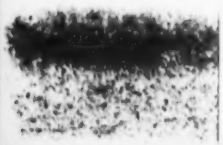
**Chapter 5: What Do The Findings Mean**

1. Student Profile and Demographics
2. Financial Support and Third Level Allowance
3. Access Routes and Reasons for Going to University
4. Student Support
5. Relationships and External Commitments
6. Success at University and Examination Results

Conclusion

**Chapter 6: Policy Proposal**

1. Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs
2. Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
3. National University of Ireland at Maynooth
4. Mature Students



# CHAPTER 5: WHAT DO THE FINDINGS MEAN?

In this chapter we will comment on the findings as outlined in Chapters Three and Four. The intention is to integrate and interpret the findings of the survey research and the interviews. The structure of the previous chapters will be followed and comments will be made under these headings:

1. Student Profile and Demographics
2. Financial Support and Third Level Allowance
3. Access Routes and Reasons for Going to University
4. Student Support
5. Relationships and External Commitments.
6. Success at University and Examination Results

## 1. Student Profile and Demographics

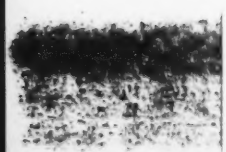
We now know that the typical mature student is young, more likely to be single and not have children. Some important policy issues are raised by these findings. Older people and people with children seem to be in the minority. New ways of attracting these groups are worth exploring, as they are under represented.

The majority of mature students attending Maynooth are from Counties Kildare and Meath and the greater Dublin area. Some live in these counties now, having moved as part of their return to learning. Innovative ways of attracting people from more outlying areas need to be explored. The Maynooth campus in Kilkenny may be one such initiative. Others are needed. The earlier review of policy in Chapter One indicated that there is a problem with the geographic spread of students on TLA. There are many layers to disadvantage and it is important to stress again that people from Designated Areas of Disadvantage are under represented both on TLA and in university.

## 2. Financial Support and Third Level Allowance

Finance was an issue that students discussed on many occasions. It was not however the most crucial issue for them but it was always close to the surface. The £100 book allowance was greeted as a significant and welcome contribution and indicates that small increases in funding make substantial differences to students lives.

Looking back over what people said about their experience of TLA and financial issues, it is quite clear that what affects them most is the level of confusion that exists concerning their benefits. They suffer confusion when it comes to the criteria used to determine the benefits to which they are entitled. Of course, mature students have some notion of their entitlements, but it is the nature of the information they get from the local social welfare officer that is problematic. The various ways of getting information about benefits (from friends, from welfare officers, etc.)



have affected the different groups of mature students in different ways. It clearly has not affected young, single mature students in the way it has affected Lone Parents, for example. The seemingly ad-hoc nature of both the getting and the giving of information has produced a culture of confusion about welfare entitlements.

This culture of confusion is a three-sided phenomenon, relating to the three different actors involved: the students themselves; the university authorities, and the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs. Clearly, students approach the Department, or at least their representatives, as individuals. There is little collectively organised effort by mature students to obtain accurate information. The available information, when shared among students, leads to ever increasing spirals of confusion, anxiety and stress for the students themselves.

The university plays no active role in ensuring that students can obtain correct information. The financial side of the student's life only impinges on the university when students either suffer at examinations because of financial stress, or drop out. The students, in a very real way, are on their own when it comes to financing their studies.

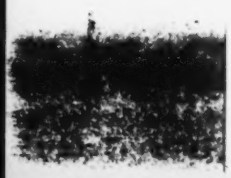
The Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs plays a leading role in this confusion. Although it was clear that students generally appreciated the chance to go to university and at the same time hold on to their benefits, it was evident that students receive conflicting information from different welfare officers. The distribution of information to the officers who meet students seems to be done in a rather ad-hoc manner. When we combine students own propagation of inconsistent information, the lack of involvement on the part of the university, and the role of the Department, we have a situation in which finance, which always causes some anxiety among students, is allowed to play a disproportionate role in increasing students' levels of stress.

Women, who incur additional financial costs for child care, and particularly lone parents, are more affected by this culture of confusion than any other group of students.

### 3. Access Routes and Reasons for going to University

The reasons why people return to university are mostly personal and individual. There is almost a complete absence of any motivation coming from a concern for a social or political agenda. People do not, it seems, go to university to learn about social justice or about making political or social change in society. It may be that there is no such market but it should be worrying that there is not surfacing among students a trades union constituency or other social action agenda.

In the opinion of all the students met in the course of this research, access courses are of crucial importance. The induction course organised by NUI Maynooth at the beginning of first year is highly appreciated. NCIR pro-



vides an extensive access provision. In line with the Partnership 2000, NUI Maynooth might look at this possibility too. Partnership 2000 (1996, p. 22) promises;

> a strategy to enable non-standard applicants, particularly disadvantaged and mature students, to participate in third level education, in particular by encouraging third level institutions to develop initiatives similar to the NCIR.

There are really two issues here about which we would like to comment. The first is the question of motivation to access university, and the second concerns the role of access courses in preparing students for university.

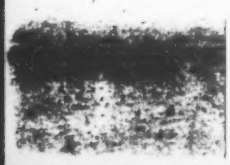
**Motivation to Access University**

In discussing the motivation of students we identified three different groups. There were those who were always somewhat motivated but only needed the time to be right. This kind of motivation is most common among women with children, particularly married women. The second group were those who were looking for a qualification that would kick-start their careers. This motivation is especially strong among those students who have spent their working lives in low-waged, dead-end jobs, with very little personal and career satisfaction. The third group wanted to prove to themselves that they could get a degree. It was on VTOS that this group first started to think about college and VTOS provided the springboard from which they took the jump to applying to go to university.

Motivation is an important part of the process of accessing university. By grouping students in this way, there might develop a better understanding of what prompts students to return to education, by access course providers and by the university which recruits students.

We found that those who go to university in order to secure a job do better at examinations than those who go for personal fulfilment. Those who did not Matriculate on the basis of a Leaving Certificate were at risk. All those who failed First Arts in 1997 did not matriculate on the basis of a Leaving Certificate. But those who do no access course (they usually have matriculated) do well. This has important implications for a university that accepts significant numbers of students in these "at risk" categories. This implies that there is some measure of responsibility on the university to support "at risk" students in their journey through university.

The findings and comments of this research are not saying that the VTOS Leaving Certificate courses that prepare participants for the Leaving Certificate are not important. They are of major importance. They often are the place where students, for the first time, became aware of the possibility of going to college or university.



The "proof" people (those who go to university to prove they can get a degree, they are the "VTOS people") raise a fundamental question for those who organise access courses. The standard philosophy behind these courses is a service-oriented one. Those who provide the courses essentially supply on demand; it is viewed as a question of responding to needs. With the "proof" people, however, we can see that these students identified their own needs more or less during the access course itself. What increases the importance of this group is their decidedly working-class origins. Many working class people do not see going to university as an option. The need to go to university was not felt by these students prior to joining VTOS, and an access route based on a service-oriented approach will find itself unable to attract students who do not see going to university as a possibility. Providing a broadly based course such as VTOS Leaving Certificate opens unpredicted and unplanned outcomes for students.

**Preparation for University**

There was an overwhelmingly positive response to access courses as a personal and academic preparation. We suggest that these courses might be constructed as the first year of a four-year degree. The nearer these courses were, both in teaching methods and course content, to the experience of university, the more positive the response was from the students. There was a negative reaction if an access course and its surroundings did not resemble that of the university itself. In consequence, it is not difficult to imagine the university providing its own access routes for its own degree programmes.

## 4. Student Support

It is worth returning to the comments made in the questionnaires about the adequacy of the crèche, counselling and study guidance provided in the university. The crèche is hugely useful but small issues like the need to take children out at lunch time caused some inconvenience. Counselling and study guidance are also areas where the needs of students might be more clearly ascertained and re-evaluated.

We found that in discussing support for students we were able to identify three different experiences of support: those who received their support mainly from other mature students; those who were supported mostly by friends and family; and those who basically supported themselves. Very few make it without some support. Support was an issue even for those who, either wittingly or unwittingly, go through university on their own. In this category, problems arose for students that led to examination failure, problems that might have been solved with support from other students, family or the university itself.

Students do need support. But what is important here is the need for increased support from the university itself. No student mentioned, without prompting, the university as a source of support when sources of support were being discussed. However, individually, lecturers and other staff

members are very friendly and experienced as hugely supportive. This support, however, may be reactive rather than proactive.

Student support is really an access issue. The process of access does not stop with admission to university; it is something that is ongoing during a student's time at university, but especially during the first year. The university as provider of opportunities for access to degree programmes, needs to seriously consider both the individual nature, and the service-oriented philosophy of its already existing networks of student support. Instead it might consider and develop a public and proactive policy and practice.

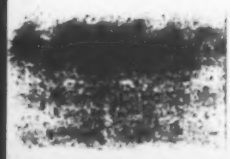
**5. Relationships and External Commitments**

Three issues were identified when we looked at students' experience of external commitments: resentment; guilt; and marital difficulties. Resentment and guilt were generally experienced by women. They felt resented by their family (husband, children) and at the same time, felt guilty about being at university and away from home. No man we talked to experienced the same kind of resentment or guilt. Having said that, there were far fewer married men, and/or men with children, than married women and/or women with children, at university. For instance, married women and lone parents make up two sizeable groupings of mature students at university.

Family relationships and external obligations were for many a major part of the reality of being a mature student. Of course, the university is not equipped to deal with these issues. Its traditional base of 18-21 year old students live academic lives relatively free from family responsibilities and obligations of this kind. It is in the interest of the university and the student body to begin to see mature students as part of a network of relationships and commitments. Innovative and creative ways of providing a more flexible path through university would go some way towards reducing pressure from relationships and external commitments. Modular and part-time study might be a more appropriate path for some adults. Five out of six of those who failed First Arts in 1997 were single and had no children. External commitments and relationships were not an obvious contributor to examination failure. That no link with examination results can be found does not mean that these factors do not colour in a dramatic way the experience of many students. [We are aware of the small numbers involved but these findings are supported throughout the research].

Our study found that married people face unique difficulties. Fifty percent of the married students in our interview sample were having, or already had, experienced marital problems. They all said university is a major contributor to the development of these problems. This is true for both men and women students.

A significant number of students we interviewed talked about having experienced a range of problems, difficulties and traumas including the



death or suicide of a friend, divorce, alcoholism, child abuse, etc. Adults are more than intellects or minds and a higher education institute and its students would be well served by a more holistic support for students learning. Adults need support for many kinds of learnings - not all of them academic.

Before leaving these statistical findings, the researchers would like to comment on how difficult it was to get good information on mature students. Questionnaires produced a predictable response rate. A university with an excellent reputation for encouraging applications from mature students and with a commitment to social justice would benefit if these policies and other initiatives were monitored and researched. How else can such policies and commitments be evaluated as to whether they are being achieved? The university collects a considerable amount of information about its student population through application procedures, registration and departmental records. Very often this information is not kept in a useful format for monitoring the progress of such groups as mature students, TLA students, women, lone parents, etc. The information collected might be stored in a manner that would facilitate the continued monitoring and review of the progress of distinct groups of students. Having computerised records should help this process greatly.

### 6. Success At University And Examination Results

Mature students generally do well at examinations. But some students are more successful than others. Who are they? Can we identify the reasons for their success? We found that those who failed were more likely to be single, have no children, did not matriculate on the basis of the Leaving Certificate, did not take a University Foundation course, were on TLA and came to university in pursuit of knowledge for the sake of knowledge or personal fulfilment.

While external relationships and commitments and finance figured prominently in the discussions with students and coloured their experience of university, the factors that actually influenced their success at examinations were different. One would imagine that the single students who had fewer difficulties with external commitments and financial support should have done better. We should also remember that it was single people with no children who had the most positive experience of the TLA scheme. They were in fact at risk. Why is this? It is possible to argue two ways about the significance of this finding. It could be argued that, on the basis of a class analysis, these TLA students with a lower economic base to others do less well because of the impact of their financial position. This absence of money may lead them to miss lectures more often, etc. The argument builds on the basis that low economic status leads one to be less well able to take up opportunities and so do less well. This is, for many people, a compelling argument.

But if we are to bring a critical eye to bear we must take into account one more factor. The other factor is the actual income of students on TLA.

Their income is composed of TLA, maintenance grant, rent allowance, travel grant, book allowance and secondary benefits, etc. While no one would propose that this is an adequate income, it is difficult to argue, on comparative terms and from their own interviews, that this group of students see themselves as financially insecure.

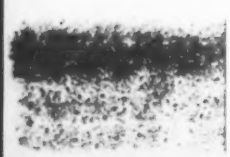
Successful people are more likely to be those who go to university with vocational ambitions and a good grounding in the ways of the university. They have learned the *college knowledge*, "run with hare and dash with the hounds" reality of university and are more capable of dealing with it. For them their learner identity is negotiable. In the experience of mature students it is the ability to cope with this *college knowledge* that is the best indicator of success. This is confirmed in both survey research and interviews.

What struck us most when reviewing the data we had gathered for this study, was the significance of the learning process. The most important "make or break" issue for students was whether they could cope with the demands of the university to produce essays, assignments and pass exams. To be successful and get a degree, students must pass their examinations. There are two sides to this relationship: the student learning and the university teaching. Our research leads us believe that there are two kinds of knowledge. Mature students bring a vast amount of acquired knowledge based on their own experience. Their knowledge both constitutes and shapes how they view themselves as learners. They are their experience and this is their "learner identity."

The university, on the other hand, has its own body of knowledge. It has *college knowledge* that constitutes and shapes how it views its own identity. The university, however, does not identify itself as a learner, but as a teacher. This provides the basis for the university identity.

The most important finding of this research is that the interaction between these two forms of knowledge is, for students, the single most important issue influencing their success or failure at university. We went further and concluded from our data that, in so far as this is a conflict, the university wins. These ideas require further elaboration.

Zygmunt Bauman (1990, p. 8) eloquently argues that sociology is a way of thinking about the human world that is in contrast to common sense thinking. All the subjects of the sociologist's study have been named before and have become the subject of common sense knowledge: family, organisation, race, church, gender, cities, etc. Sociology then, is intimately related to common sense and both sociological knowledge and common sense knowledge share an interest in human experience. The sociologist, according to Bauman, brings a sociological perspective to bear on these objects of study. The sociologist is more interested in the general than the particular; in accumulating and testing evidence rather than guessing and relying on individual beliefs, etc.



If we replace sociological knowledge and common sense knowledge with *college knowledge* and experiential knowledge respectively, then our argument becomes clearer. The knowledge of the university is more akin to sociological knowledge, or as we call it, *college knowledge* than to common sense knowledge or experiential knowledge.

What is missing in Bauman's provocative presentation is the educational question. How can someone embedded and even submerged in common sense or experience based knowledge be brought to explore a different kind of knowledge that is more critical; more interested in generality than anecdote; in logic, evidence and testing rather than guessing and individual beliefs? But in asking the educational question, we are not saying that the student does not know any sociology. The student does know, though in a common sense way, a great deal about religion, family, unemployment, work, politics, race, etc. The problem for the educator is this: how can the student be helped to move to a more abstract, theoretical, contextualising, investigation of reality?

The interesting answer from adult education is that learning involves not a placing of the new *college knowledge* on top of the old common sense knowledge but an archaeology of knowledge (Freire) or an attempt to engage the student in reworking the frame of reference within which they make meaning (Mezirow, 1996). The process of learning involves the discovery of one's own way of constructing meaning (whether sociological, experiential or otherwise) and identifying the strengths and weaknesses of this frame of reference. Then there is the possibility of discovering new frameworks, paradigms and world views. The interaction need not be characterised as an unequal discourse but a matter of how both the college knowledge and the common sense knowledge together engage in a rational discourse so that the learner is convinced rather than forced to think differently (under the pressure of exams).

It is Susan Weil's work on mature students (1986; 1988) which for us, best characterises the experience of mature students at Maynooth University. Her focus on the "learner identity" and the dissonance between it and the "university identity" provides a good framework within which to understand what mature students experience and how they deal with this dissonance. It does, indeed, involve a process of negotiation on the part of the students. It is, however, the most significant part of the overall negotiation process which students face. Dealing with financial difficulties, getting support, facing the stress of familial commitments - all of these involve some form of negotiation and compromise by students. They also affect different groups in different ways. When it comes to negotiating their way around *college knowledge*, these hurdles pale in comparison. Although the literature pointed to class differences in relation to the learner identity, we found that class, although of some importance, really was not adequate to explain what was being experienced by students. The "hurdle" that is *college knowledge* may have gender and class dimensions to it but it is faced by people across the board.

The statistical data from the questionnaires strongly confirms the analysis provided here. We recall that the statistical data clearly identified "the right access" and "the right attitude" as the factors that contribute to examination success at university. If one had the right access course - which taught *college knowledge* - these students arrive at university knowing they have to negotiate the *college knowledge* dilemma. They know they will have to in order to be successful!

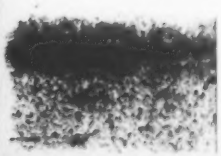
This last statement needs one qualification. Age, according to our research, is the one other variable that affects the learner/university identity. Younger students, especially those under 30, appear to have less difficulty dealing with *college knowledge*. Students like Trish, Irene and Jim were all able to successfully negotiate between the two different identities. They were successful in this negotiation because they were able to compartmentalise the two different identities. Each had its place. Interestingly enough, it was Tadhg, a middle-aged man, who used the term "compartmentalisation" in reference to this process of negotiation. The difference between Tadhg and the younger students was that he felt more personally affronted by the necessity of negotiation. He understood what needed to be done and dealt with the situation. This is why he was successful at university. At the same time, he was quite conscious of what needed to be done. He did not like it, but he dealt with it. The younger students who were successful, although much less conscious of the process, were not affronted to the same degree as Tadhg and other students of his age. Their learner identity was not threatened in the way that older students' learner identities were. Even if they were conscious of the fact that *college knowledge* was not living up to their expectations, it did not pose a significant threat to them or their ability to progress through their degree programme.

If we look at this issue even closer, we can see that the younger students' learner identity was not copper fastened to the same degree as older students. The leaner identity of the younger students was not, in their perception, synonymous with their own selfhood, their identity. They were able to keep the two relatively separate. With the older students, however, it appears that they viewed themselves as learners and as adults grounded in common sense. This is why the dissonance between their learner identity and the university identity posed such a threat to older adults.

So, when we step back from these issues of identity and knowledge, and compare them to issues such as finances and student support, we can understand more clearly the relative importance of *college knowledge* as a hurdle for mature students, particularly older mature students.

**Conclusion**

It is clear from this research that mature students present a university with both new opportunities and challenges. The literature review mentioned the Memorandum on Higher Education in the European

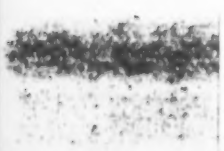




75

Community. It suggested reviewing access, developing modular programmes and part-time courses. It suggested greater flexibility of academic entry conditions, acceptance of vocational qualifications, giving credit for "maturity" and work experience and training received in the workplace. Pressure to change comes not only from students but by policy initiatives from the EU.

The university in welcoming students of mature years is inviting into its environment a very different student population that has a different epistemological basis. They pose interesting and significant questions as to what constitutes a university and its knowledge. This development may present the university with challenging opportunities to redefine access and accessibility not just as administrative issues but as core issues dealing with the identity of the university and its understanding of knowledge, learning, teaching, curriculum and teacher/student relationships. All may yet be redefined by mature students!



# CHAPTER 6: POLICY PROPOSALS

The research findings are essentially a step on the way to informing policy. In this case, the findings have implications for the policy of the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs that sponsored the research, for the higher education sector and NUI Maynooth in particular, for VTOS providers and the mature student body.

We propose that the **Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs:**

- co-ordinate the distribution of information about benefits and entitlements so that officers of the Department give clear, understandable, consistent and written information about all aspects of the Third Level Allowance and Lone Parent Allowance Schemes.

- initiate a training and development programme for front-line staff to ensure the accurate delivery of information.

- develop a user friendly information pack for students on TLA.

- explore the possibility of funding, or co-funding with the higher education sector, student counsellors with expertise in working with adults and with a clear brief to support the mature student population at university.

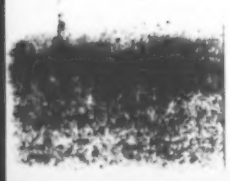
- target funding in a way that addresses the needs of particular groups rather than students in general, e.g. for crèche, transport, maintenance, etc. Build on the success of the book allowance and identify specific needs which arise, for example, at the beginning of the academic year - clothes, materials, etc.

- explore ways of encouraging the participation of students from those counties who are under represented in higher education.

- continue to provide educational opportunities and new possibilities for adults on social welfare as the unanticipated benefits of such programmes are worthwhile.

- remove anomalies, e.g. the requirement that students be on the live register for 6 months before moving on to postgraduate studies.

- co-ordinate provision with other Government Departments so that anomalies like the inability to change status during the course do not leave a small number disadvantaged in their efforts to become mobile in pursuit of qualifications (and eventually work).



We recommend that **VTOS providers:**

- plan and implement, for those interested in going to higher education, a bridging studies module or progression route to aid the advancement of those who graduate from VTOS with a Leaving Certificate, but not an access course.

This report also recommends that **NUI Maynooth** consider these policy proposals under the following headings:

**Administration:**

- that the university develop and promulgate a comprehensive policy on mature students with targets and supports clearly articulated; with procedures and criteria for admission clearly defined; the number of places on offer decided, etc.

- that NUI Maynooth establish a mature student officer in the Registrar's Office to consolidate access, access information, recruitment and the gathering and monitoring of statistics on the mature student population. This would help monitor policy on access.

- that sources of funding continue to be identified, e.g. HEA Institutional Support for Students who are Disadvantaged, Mature Students, etc. and programmes put in place to respond to the carefully researched needs of these students.

- that NUI Maynooth generate a database of mature students keeping the data gathered during the admission process so as to monitor the success of university policy on mature students.

- establish in the Centre for Adult and Community Education a dedicated access provision in line with Partnership 2000.

- Continue the induction provision for mature students and expand the support through the first year in particular.

**Student Support:**

- explore with the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs the possibility of co-funding a mature student counsellor with expertise in working with adults and with a clear brief to support the mature student population at university.

- clarify the duties and responsibilities of the mature student liaison staff person in each Department.

- that the university be proactive in facilitating the development of mature students rites of passage by encouraging family friendly events.

**Academic Practices:**

- that the entire university, both administration and academic sectors, work to bring about not only improved access but increased accessibility to the knowledge of the academy. This would involve changes in curriculum, teaching methods, course scheduling, modularisation, accreditation of prior learning, assessment methods, etc.

- that academic departments have clear criteria and procedures published for mature student admissions.

Finally, we suggest that **mature students** themselves take an increasingly active part in the resolution of some of the issues mentioned in the report. In particular, they might, as an organisation,

- communicate with the Department of Society, Community and the Family as an organised group rather than as individuals in order to enhance their ability to get clear information on entitlements.

# APPENDIX 1

**Methodology**

There are four sections to our methodology:

a. General philosophy behind our method
b. Identifying required information
c. Finding information
d. Analysing information

**a. General philosophy**

Previous studies, generally speaking, have tended to rely on statistical quantitative data in order to explain mature student provision and experience. Not only that, they have not included mature students in the research process itself. The philosophy behind our method is different in that it wanted to include these mature students as consultants in the research process. We wanted their voices to be heard and included in the policy implications/recommendations that we drew up in the final stage of this report. The focus is on more qualitative methods and draws on, but not exclusively, action and grounded theory methods. We say not exclusively as we needed to gather some quantitative data on matures in order to provide representative samples for interviews. We also did not go into this research on mature students totally blind. We did know quite a lot about certain aspects of mature student provision and experience, and could draw on literature from outside Ireland when needed. The aim was to incorporate the mature student experience within a wider policy outline and analysis.

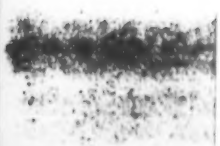
**b. Identifying required information**

There were two sets of information we were looking for. First, information concerning the general profile and demographics of mature students at Maynooth. Second, information on the experience of being a mature student, as told by students themselves.

**c. Finding Information**

In terms of the first set of information, we sent out a detailed questionnaire (See Appendix 2) to all the registered mature students at Maynooth. A pilot study using a draft questionnaire was carried out with the mature student society at Maynooth to judge the usefulness and reliability of the questions. Questionnaires were sent to 298 students in both Arts and Science. We received 164 back, or 55 percent of the mature student population. Respondents were asked to include their name and phone number if they were willing to take part in an individual interview. The vast majority agreed to be interviewed.

For the experience of mature students, we took a sample of respondents based on certain characteristics (Age, gender, marital status, TLA status, matriculation status, number of dependants) and conducted semi-struc-

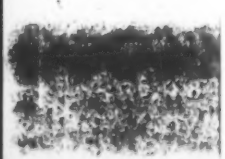


tured in-depth interviews with them. There were twenty individual interviews in total.

We also carried out four focus groups. We carried out the first focus group before we sent out the questionnaire to develop a general understanding of the mature student experience at Maynooth (contact names and numbers were provided by the Admissions Office). The other three were carried out after the individual interviews were completed. We felt there were certain areas we needed to investigate more fully, and carried out three focus groups on TLA, Lone Parents, and the experience of VTOS as an access route.

**d. Analysing Information:**
We coded and processed the statistical data on mature students from the questionnaire. We examined the significance of particular variables (age, sex, marital status, financial status, socio-economic background, access routes taken, number of dependants, etc.) on their experiences at university.

For the qualitative data gained during the interviews and focus groups, we generated themes around each of the issues discussed during the interviews, and examined the similarities and differences that exist between students around those themes. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured using information from both literature and questionnaire sources. Issues that arose during the interviews or focus groups which were not an explicit focus of the study were incorporated into the findings.



# APPENDIX 2

**Questionnaire**

The Centre for Adult and Community Education is presently carrying out research on mature students at St. Patrick's College, Maynooth. This questionnaire is the first part of the research. We would greatly appreciate if you could complete this questionnaire and indicate at the end whether or not you would like to take part in the second and final part of the research. This final part of the research is an interview where you will be asked to describe in more detail your experiences at Maynooth College.

**All the information provided will be strictly confidential.**

1. YEAR OF BIRTH _____

2. **MALE** ¬ **FEMALE** ¬ *(please tick)*

3. **NATIONALITY** _____

4. **MARITAL STATUS** *(please tick)*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MARRIED | ¬ | SINGLE | ¬ | |
| WIDOWED | ¬ | SEPARATED | ¬ | *(please tick)* |

5. **PLEASE INDICATE NUMBER OF CHILDREN AND THEIR AGES:**

| *Age* | *Number of Children* |
|---|---|
| LESS THAN 5 YEARS OLD | ___ |
| BETWEEN 5 AND 10 YEARS | ___ |
| BETWEEN 11 AND 15 YEARS | ___ |
| BETWEEN 16 AND 20 YEARS | ___ |
| 21 YEARS OR OLDER | ___ |

6. **DID YOU MATRICULATE ON THE BASIS OF YOUR LEAVING CERTIFICATE?**

YES ¬ NO ¬ *(please tick)*

*(Note: in order to matriculate, you need at least 6 passes, 2 honours in honour's subjects, and passes in English, Irish, Maths, and a foreign language)*

7. **PRIOR TO COMING TO MAYNOOTH, DID YOU DO ANY OF THE FOLLOWING COURSES:?** *(please tick):*

| | |
|---|---|
| VTOS Leaving Certificate | ¬ |
| Access to Education Course | ¬ |
| University Foundation Course | ¬ |
| Return to Learning/Study Course | ¬ |
| Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) | ¬ |

8. **PLEASE INDICATE ANY OTHER EDUCATION COURSES YOU HAVE TAKEN SINCE YOU LEFT SECONDARY SCHOOL** *(if none, please leave blank):*

9. **WHAT COURSE ARE YOU ATTENDING IN MAYNOOTH** *(please tick):*

1st arts ¬ 2nd arts ¬
3rd arts ¬ post-grad ¬

Other *(please indicate)*

10. **ARE YOU?:**

Full-time ¬ Part-time ¬ *(please tick)*

11. **PLEASE INDICATE WHICH SUBJECTS YOU STUDIED IN EACH YEAR AT COLLEGE AND YOUR EXAM RESULTS (%) FOR EACH SUBJECT:**

| 1st Arts | % | 2nd Arts | % | 3rd Arts | % | Post-Grad | % | Other | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | | | | |

12. **WHAT STUDENT ORGANISATIONS HAVE YOU JOINED AT COLLEGE?** *(If none leave blank) IF NONE LEAVE BLANK):*

13. **ARE YOU PRESENTLY IN PAID EMPLOYMENT?**

YES ¬ NO ¬ *(please tick)*

14. **IF YES, PLEASE STATE YOUR JOB TITLE:**

15. **IF YOU HAVE A JOB, IS IT?**

Full-time ¬ Part-time ¬ *(please tick)*



83

16. **BETWEEN THE TIME YOU LEFT SECONDARY SCHOOL AND ENTERED MAYNOOTH, WHAT WAS YOUR MAIN OCCUPATION?**
*(if you did not have one main job but had several different ones, please write 'various' and indicate the type of work, e.g., manual, clerical, etc.):*

17. **PLEASE INDICATE HOW YOU SUPPORT YOURSELF FINANCIALLY WHILE AT MAYNOOTH** *(e.g., grant, scholarship, part-time job, spousal support, etc.):*

18. **ARE YOU PRESENTLY ON THE THIRD LEVEL ALLOWANCE SCHEME?**

YES ☐ NO ☐ *(please tick)*

19. **PLEASE INDICATE WHAT WAS YOUR MAIN REASON FOR ATTENDING UNIVERSITY:**

20. **PLEASE SUMMARISE WHAT YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE MOST ENJOYABLE ASPECTS OF BEING A STUDENT AT MAYNOOTH COLLEGE:**

21. **PLEASE SUMMARISE WHAT YOU CONSIDER TO BE THE LEAST ENJOYABLE ASPECTS OF BEING A STUDENT AT MAYNOOTH COLLEGE:**

22. **OVERALL, HOW WOULD YOU SUMMARISE YOUR EXPERIENCE OF MAYNOOTH COLLEGE SO FAR?:**

_____

_____

_____

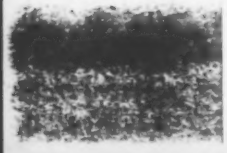
_____

23. **THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO FILL IN THIS QUESTIONNAIRE. THE RESEARCH PROJECT WILL ALSO FOCUS, THROUGH THE INTERVIEWS, ON THE EXPERIENCES OF MATURE STUDENTS IN COLLEGE. WOULD YOU BE INTERESTED IN TAKING PART IN THIS ASPECT OF THE STUDY?**

YES ☐ NO ☐

*Please return in SAE to the following address:*

Dr. Ted Fleming, Centre for Adult and Community Education,
National University of Ireland, Maynooth, Co. Kildare.



## REFERENCES


Agar, D. (1990) "Non-traditional Students: Perceptions of Problems which Influence Academic Success," *Higher Education*, 19, 435-454.

Bauman, Z. (1990) *Thinking Sociologically*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Blaxter, L. and Tight, M. (1993) "'I'm only doing it to get in the black gown': Dream and Reality for Adults in Part-time Higher Education," *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 17, 1, 13-21.

Bourner, T. (1991) *Part-Time Students and their Experience of Higher Education*. Buckingham, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Bryant, R. (1995) "Why Does Being a Mature Student Have to be so Painful?," *Adults Learning*, 6, 9, 270-271.

Burkitt, B. (1995) "Black Women Returning to Higher Education: Progression Issues," *Adults Learning*, 6, 5, 159-161.

Christensen, M. (1994) "Who are Non-Traditional Students?," *Adult Learning*, 6, 1, 19.

Clancy, P. (1994) "Expanding Enrolments in Higher Education - Some Trends and Implications," in *The Role of the University in Society*. Dublin: National University of Ireland.

Clancy, P. (1997) "Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland: Participation and Performance," *Higher Education Quarterly*, 51, 1, 86-106.

Cochrane, C. (1991) "First Year at University: A Study of Mature Female Students," *The Irish Journal of Education*, 25, 42-51.

Commission on Higher Education (1984) *Lifelong Learning* (Kenny Report). Dublin: Stationary Office.

Committee on Adult Education (1973) *Adult Education in Ireland* (Murphy Report). Dublin: Stationary Office.

Cox, R. and Pascall, G. (1994) "Individualism, Self-Evaluation and Self-Fulfillment in the Experiences of Mature Women Students," *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 13, 2, 159-173.

Crozier, R. and Garbert-Jones, A. (1996, April) "Finding a Voice: Shyness in Mature Students Experience of University," *Adults Learning*, 195-198.

Davis, A. (1984) "A Preparation Course of Adults Intending to Study at University," *Adult Education*, 57, 1, 36-43.

Devine, D. (1996) Sociological Response to the White Paper - Charting Our Education Future. Unpublished paper.

Douglas, J. et al. (1984) "Returning to Study: Access Point to Continuing Education," *Adult Education*, 57, 2, 131-134.

Edwards, R. (1993) *Mature Women Students: Separating or Connecting Family and Education*. London: Taylor and Francis.

Fulton, O. (Ed.), (1989) *Access and Institutional Change*. Milton Keynes: SRHE and Open University Press.

Gooderham, P. (1993) "A Conceptual Framework of Sociological Perspectives on the Pursuit by Adults of Access to Higher Education," *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 12, 1, 27-39.

Grainger, R. (1979) "Working Class Mature Students and Full-time Higher Education," *Adult Education (NIACE)*, 52, 4, 237-243.

Halpin, A. (1997) "Equalising Opportunities for Students: The NCEA Access Scheme," in R. Morris, (Ed.), *Mature Students in Higher Education*. Proceedings of Conference in Athlone RTC, March, 1996. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.

Higher Education Authority. (1995) *Report of the Steering Committee on the Future Development of Higher Education*. Dublin: HEA.

hooks, bell. (1994) *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge.

James, D. (1995) "Mature Studentship in Higher Education: Beyond a Species Approach," *British Journal of the Sociology of Education*, 16, 4, 451-466.

Johnson, R. (1979) "'Really Useful Knowledge': Radical Education and Working Class Culture." In Clarke, Critcher and Johnson, (Eds.), *Working Class Culture*. London: Hutchinson.

Johnson, R. and Bailey, R. (1984) *Mature Students and Their Experiences of Full-time and Part-time Higher Education*. Sheffield: PAVIC.

Johnson-Bailey, J. and Cervero, R. (1996) "An Analysis of the Educational Narratives of Reentry Black Women," *Adult Education Quarterly*, 46, 3, 142-157.

Jones, B. and Johnson, R. (1983) "New Horizons: an Introduction to University Studies," *Adult Education*, 56, 3, 218-226.

Knowles, M. (1978) *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* 2nd.ed. Heuston, Texas: Gulf.

Liggett, E. (1982) "The Universities and Mature Student Entry," *Adult Education*, 55, 2, 125-136.

Lindsay, C. (1996) "Higher Education in the Republic of Ireland," a paper read at Conference on Higher Education in Britain and Ireland: Participation and Policies 1-2nd April, 1996. Dublin: HEA.

Lucas, S. and Ward, P. (1985) "Mature Students at University," *Adult Education*, 58, 2, 151-157.

Lynch, K. (1996) "The Policy Context," in M. Martin and C. O'Neill (eds.), *A Degree at Last: Stories of Choice, Challenge and Change to Celebrate the European Year of Lifelong Learning*. Dublin: AONTAS.

Lynch, K. (1997) "A Profile of Mature Students in Higher Education and an Analysis of Equality Issues." In R. Morris, (Ed.), *Mature Students in Higher Education*. Proceedings of Conference in Athlone RTC, March, 1996. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.

McMahon, B. (1997) "The Meaning and Relevance of Education for Working-Class Mature Students: A Personal View." In R. Morris, (Ed.), *Mature Students in Higher Education*. Proceedings of Conference in Athlone RTC, March, 1996. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.

Martin, M. and O'Neill, C. (1996) A Degree at Last: Stories of Choice, Challenge *and Change to Celebrate the European Year of Lifelong Learning*. Dublin: Aontas.

Maynard, E. and Pearsall, S. (1994) "What about Male Mature Students? A Comparison of the Experiences of Men and Women Students," *Journal of Access Studies*, 9, 229-240.

McGivney, V. (1996) *Staying or Leaving the Course: Non-Completion and Retention of Mature Students in Further and Higher Education*. Leicester, UK: National Organisation for Adult Learning.

Mezirow, J. (1996) "Adult Education and Empowerment for Individual and Community Development." In Connolly, Fleming, McCormack & Ryan, (Eds.) *Radical Learning for Liberation: Maynooth Adult and Community Education - Occasional Series.* Maynooth: MACE.

Morris, R. (Ed.), (1997) *Mature Students in Higher Education.* Proceedings of Conference in Athlone RTC, March, 1996. Cork: Higher Education Equality Unit.

Morrissey, M. (1990) "Mature Students and Continuing Education in Ireland," *Irish Journal of Education,* 24, 12-26.

Morrissey, M. and Irvine, D. (1991) "Part-Time Mature Students in Higher Education: A Case Study," *Irish Educational Studies,* 10, 1, 244-255.

*Partnership 2000 for Inclusion, Employment and Competitivness* (1996) Dublin: Government Publications.

Parry, G. (1997) "Patterns of Participation in Higher Education in England: A Statistical Summary and Commentary," *Higher Education Quarterly,* 51, 1, 6-28.

Pascall, G. and Cox, R. (1993) *Women Returning to Higher Education.* Buckingham, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Polson, C. (1994) "Developmental Advising for Non-Traditional Students," *Adult Learning,* 6, 1, 21-23.

Redding, N. and Dowling, W. (1992) "Rites of Passage Among Women Reentering Higher Education," *Adult Education Quarterly,* 42, 4, 221-236.

Rice, J. and Meyer, S. (1990) "Continuing Education for Women," in Merriam and Cunningham, (Eds.), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Richardson, J. (1995) "Mature Students in Higher Education: II. An Investigation of Approaches to Studying and Academic Performance," *Studies in Higher Education,* 20, 1, 5-17.

Rickwood, P. (1981) "Teaching Mature Students to Study," *Adult Education,* 54, 1, 6-11.

Scott, C., Burns, A. and Cooney, G. (1996) "Reasons for Discontinuing Study: The Case of Mature Age Female Students with Children," *Higher Education,* 31, 233-253.

Tight, M. (1993) "Is Britain a Western European Country?: A Multivariate Analysis of Western Higher Education Systems," *Higher Education Quarterly,* 47, 3, 223-236.

Thompson, J. (1996) "'Really Useful Knowledge': Linking Theory and Practice," in Connolly, Fleming, McCormack, and Ryan (Eds.) *Radical Learning for Liberation: Maynooth Adult and Community Education - Occasional Series.* Maynooth: MACE.

Weil, S. (1986) "Non-Traditional Learners Within Traditional Higher Education Institutions: Discovery and Disappointment," *Studies in Higher Education,* 11, 3, 219-235.

Weil, S. (1988) "From a Language of Observation to a Language of Experience: Studying the Perspectives of Adults in Higher Education," *Journal of Access Studies,* 1988, 13, 1, 17-43.

Woodley, A., Wagner, L., Slowey, M., Hamilton, M. and Fulton, O. (1987) *Choosing to Learn: Adults in Education.* Milton Keynes, UK: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Wray, D. (1996) "Should Higher Education for Adults Carry a Health Warning for Their Relationships?," *Proceedings of SCUTREA Conference, Sheffield, 1996.* Sheffield: SCUTREA.

Wright, J. (1982) *Learning to Learn in Higher Education.* London: Croom Helm.

Wright, S. (1994) "Book Review of Edwards (1993)," *Teaching Sociology,* 22, 251-352.

*I always had this suspicion that I was stupid, I've had it in me head for years, I suppose it's the way I was taught in school, I dunno. Anyway, blame everybody else except yourself... I had it in me head that to do a degree course you had to be brilliant. But this is a gas, the way it turned out. But the first day I was in class, I've always been intimidated by people speaking very well, went straight to the counsellor,...and I said they're all too intelligent for me, I'll have to leave, and he started laughing, and said go back into the class, so I went back in, and it ended up, the two people that I thought were very intelligent, really and truly, one of them failed. Now you can't fail it, I mean they do anything to pass ya, give you a fecking certificate, but they won't give you high marks, and I ended up getting the highest in the class, me and another fella, so I said I can do this, it was a big turning point in me whole life, like I would have said I was never an academic, but I must be, as I was able for it, you know what I mean...*

(A mature student)

Over the past decade the numbers of mature students at university has been increasing gradually. We do not know a great deal about what happens to them, what their story is or what the experience of university is like for them. Many come from the adult education system where they learned how to study again and gained the confidence to apply to college.

This report is about the experience of Third Level Allowance students who attend university full-time.

This research was funded by a grant from the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs and conducted by the Centre for Adult and Community Education at NUI Maynooth.

NUI MAYNOOTH

**Centre for Adult & Community Education**
**National University of Ireland, Maynooth**

ISBN 0 901519 93 6
Price £8.00

89